

Playing with Literacy

Kailey M. Rozzi

The College at Brockport, State University of New York

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### Abstract

This is a qualitative research study that examines how the act of play influences the development of literacy skills. The research is formatted as a case study of a single five-year-old child from Western New York. Data were collected over the course of five weeks, with ten total observations of the focal child in his home environment. Data collection methods include interviews, observations of the focal child playing independently, observations of the focal child playing collaboratively, as well as the use of double entry journals and a cell phone for audio recordings. From the data, three major findings were discovered: a) play situations are created through imitation; b) self-directed speech is used during independent play; and c) imaginative play is promoted through social interaction with peers. Based on these major findings, conclusions and implications were made based on the way in which the focal child develops his literacy skills through various play interactions.

*Keywords:* play, literacy, interaction, independent, collaborative, imitation

### **Introduction**

As you look into a preschool classroom, you watch the children as they interact and play with one another. Although they are playing with plastic food, stuffed dolls, and creating pretend scenarios, to these children their play situations are very real. You will see that over in the housekeeping area Rosie and Jaclyn are making dinner and getting the table set for when their friends arrive. Michael realizes that they forgot to buy ingredients to make a dessert, so he quickly scribbles onto a piece of paper before going out to the grocery store to purchase the necessary ingredients for dessert. Next to the housekeeping area is the block area where Lucas and Rachel are building a city. Lucas is working on connecting different blocks together to create roads, while Rachel is piling different blocks atop and beside one another to create buildings and houses. In the music area, three children work together to make music; Jennifer is strumming a guitar, Peyton is playing a keyboard, and Steven is singing into a microphone. All of these children are very focused on the role which they have adopted. The children in housekeeping have assigned different family roles to one another as they prepare for a big dinner, the children in blocks have taken on the roles of construction workers as they build a city, and the children in the music area have transformed into a three-person rock band performing at a concert.

Looking into this classroom, most people would see the play situation at face value; these children are using their imaginations as they play fictional games with one another. Most people may not see the underlying ways in which literacy practices occur throughout children's play. Hatcher and Petty (2004) explain that when you look at play more closely, it is evident that children are ultimately building their knowledge of communication, concept development, social relationships, and specific literacy skills. While Rosie and Jaclyn are making dinner, they are using their speaking and listening skills to communicate language about what steps to follow for

their dinner preparation. When Michael is creating a grocery list, he is practicing his writing skills as he imitates interactions that he has seen other adults doing. Lucas and Rachel are using their understanding of abstract symbols and visual discrimination in order to put blocks together to create foundations that imitate roads and buildings (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). The three children in the band are using their oral and physical language skills to strum their instruments and match one another's musical rhythm. It is only when adults view play as more than just as an activity for children, but as a way for children to express themselves using different objects and means of communication, that they may recognize how play impacts children's literacy development (Hatcher & Petty, 2004).

### **Topic and Research Problem**

From my experiences working in a childcare center as a teacher's assistant, as well as working as a summer camp counselor, I have seen how play can impact children in many different ways. Among all the different ways, I have discovered that play is a way for children to practice using and developing their language skills. As children play either on their own or with other children, they use language in order to help create various play situations. They discuss what they are going to play, assign roles to one another, come up with ideas of what is going to happen in the play situation, and build upon their ideas as they play. Children use objects as symbols to represent different objects, as well as use recalled phrases they have heard before in order to take on their assigned role (Hatcher & Petty, 2004). All of these actions that take place during play are done through language, whether it is internal or external. For instance, children use complicated dialogue and expanded vocabulary based on what they have heard through other resources (Grugeon, 2005). Language use such as this ultimately helps children develop their literacy skills as language and literacy go hand in hand. Whether it is through reading, writing,

speaking, or listening, children are able to use their literacy knowledge from play in a way that is meaningful to them, and apply it in other contexts.

As my study focuses on how one child uses play in his home environment, I address how although he is not observed in a public environment, such as in a school or childcare center, literacy development still occurred as he partook in various play situations. As my observations were set in his home environment, this led to the idea that no matter the environment children are in, there are always opportunities for play. These opportunities can arise simply from a child's imagination, or through the resources they have to use in their play situations. Ultimately, a child does not need to be in a structured setting, like a school or childcare center, in order to develop their literacy skills.

### **Rationale**

This research study explores how partaking in play situations is beneficial to children's literacy development. As children play, whether with toys or props, whether it's inside or outside, they develop their literacies of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. From play, children can begin to understand and apply different aspects of language and literacy in ways that are meaningful to them. During play, children can apply what they already know to different play situations, as well as build upon the play situations even further with new ways of thinking. Hatcher and Petty (2004) have discovered that in play, children succeed in building their comprehension, use and build upon their vocabulary, further their concept awareness, and advance from concrete thinking to abstract thinking. Children are presented with situations that involve problem solving, assigning roles, understanding different symbols, categorizing materials, and testing theories all through the use of play (Hatcher & Petty, 2004). In the field of education, it is understood that the academic curriculum allows students to learn new information

and develop their prior knowledge; by illustrating how the implementation of play leads to similar academic benefits as curriculum, it is important for educators to understand that allowing their students to partake in play is beneficial to their development in many ways.

Through my previous work experiences with children, where they frequently took part in play situations, I gained first-hand experiences with the impacts that play had on children in terms of their literacy development. Based on what I already know about play and literacy, I think it is important that this research study sheds light on these impacts even further, as well as specifically address what types of play situations can impact particular literacy skills. I also believe that play is an aspect of childhood that should not be swept away, no matter what new standards are introduced to schools. Play allows children to create meaning in their daily lives, and in doing so they can ultimately become more successful as they apply newfound knowledge, they gain through play, to classroom-based practices and activities. As long as educators allow children to participate in play, it will in turn allow new opportunities to arise, information to be learned, ideas to be expanded upon, and creativity to flourish.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact that play had on one five-year-old child's literacy development in his home environment. I assessed the different types of literacy skills my focal child developed in various play situations, including his reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Gee (1996) considers literacy to be interactions that involve "behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing" (as cited in Hull & Schultz, 2001, p. 585). Based on Gee's idea, it is understood that our literacy development is not just one particular component, but several components that make individuals, and their literacy abilities, unique. From this idea, Scribner and Cole (1981) explain that children

are exposed to many different literacies through social interactions (as cited in Hull & Schultz, 2001). As children play, they use all of the different components that Gee (1996) discussed as they interact with, not only objects, but, individuals around them in order to create various play situations. Children possess their own individualized behaviors, which are created based on their levels of literacies, and explain how their interactions during play look and sound different. This, in turn, allow children to develop their literacies differently from one another, whether it is at a different rate, or in a different way altogether.

From this study, I also discovered the specific outside influences that impact my focal child's literacy development. Based on the interventions I put in place during my observational study, I assessed the differences in my focal child's literacy development across two different situational interventions: my focal child playing independently and my focal child playing collaboratively with others. These two different interactions allowed me to assess which interventions promoted more literacy development based on the different types of interactions with my focal child. I also observed which particular literacies were affected, as well as the types of play situations that caused my focal child to use particular literacies. For instance, certain interactions with objects allowed him to develop particular literacy skills, and particular interactions with individuals led him to develop other types of literacy skills.

Overall, my aim was to observe my focal child in multiple play situations, with specific interventions, in order to understand the different literacies that were being developed in my five-year-old focal child. By providing this research study with different lenses in which to observe my focal child, I approached my research questions with information that was specific to each of the three guiding questions.

### **Research Questions**

- How might play impact one five-year-old child's literacy development in a home environment?
- What types of play activities help to promote reading, writing, speaking, and listening development in the focal child?
- How is the literacy development of the focal child affected when he plays independently, with little to no interaction, as well as collaboratively, with full interaction with others?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

The concept of play as a way to promote literacy development is supported by several different concepts and theories. There are a few different types of play that benefit the literacy development in children, whether it is based on the type of play environment, or the multitude of play objects offered to children. Along with the different types of play, there are a variety of concepts and theories that support the way in which children undergo cognitive development through play scenarios. These concepts and theories help to illustrate the reasons behind the uniqueness of every child's play interactions, and how these unique interactions ultimately allow for varying degrees of literacy development.

#### **Pop Culture Integration**

As children participate in various play situations, they integrate certain references that are linked to pop culture in our society, such as different television shows, movies, video games, and music. Grugeon (2005) explains that "these unofficial media materials soon become part of their official school concerns and are part of their developing literacy practices" (p. 4). Since children

spend a lot of time outside of school, the practices that they are exposed to in their home or other environments play an important role in their practices in school. In school, Dyson (2003) explains that children draw upon the variety of media materials, characters, songs, and images that they interact with regularly outside of school (as cited in Grugeon, 2005). Rather than being a distraction to children in school, these pop culture references act as a way of creating a world of play that is significant to them both in and out of their home environments (Grugeon, 2005). Children create and imagine play scenarios by drawing upon different pop culture references, and ultimately make meaning from them. Once children are able to make meaning from their play, their learning is ultimately promoted through various developmental domains (Wellhausen & Giles, 2005).

Dyson (2003) discusses that although most educational and literacy research looks at children's lives from a school-based vantage point, more information about children is understood when they are looked at through a home-based vantage point. When children are viewed only by their interactions in schools, it is a much narrower perspective than if you were to consider their experiences outside of school, which would provide a much wider perspective about their cultural worlds (Dyson, 2003). As a lot of time is spent outside of the classroom walls, Hall, Larson, and Marsh (2003) discuss that the home environment is where the children receive the most exposure to language (as cited in Grugeon, 2005). The home environment is the place where children learn to become competent communicators through speaking and listening.

Hall, Larson, and Marsh (2005) discuss how one of the ways that children learn these communication skills are due to exposure to many different media materials such as televisions, phones, videos, and music (as cited in Grugeon, 2005). From the integration of pop culture in their play, the images and characters that are shown through media hold significant impacts on

individuals and therefore play a big role in their language and literacy development. In terms of my research study, I observed the amount that my focal child was exposed to various pop culture references, and how these references affected his play behavior.

### **Open-Ended Materials**

When children play, besides using board games and action figures, which are materials that can be described as pre-determined, they also have the option of using open-ended materials. These open-ended materials can include anything from sticks and rocks, to yarn and buttons. Any type of open-ended materials are also known as reusable materials, and have no pre-determined use, which Drew Ohlsen and Pichierri (2000) explain makes them effective for widening children's imagination and creativity (as cited in Drew & Rankin, 2004). Children can turn these objects into anything they would like during play, and in doing so it helps them to think critically as well as use problem-solving skills. They also develop a sense of power when they interact with, and create relationships with each individual material (Drew & Rankin, 2004). These relationships are built through a child's ability to identify and expand upon the purpose of open-ended materials during their play.

As children use open-ended materials during play, it paves the way for choice, independence, and exploration (Drew & Rankin, 2004). The more that children explore, the more they will come to question other ideas in the world around them. According to Drew and Rankin, (2004) when children begin to ask questions, it promotes "the next activities, investigations, and discoveries" (p. 43). While they are investigating and discovering new ideas, children are also allowing for more communication with themselves and those around them. As they communicate more, they are also using more descriptive language as they typically want to talk, write, and draw about their newfound investigations and discoveries (Drew & Rankin, 2004).

In terms of my research study, this concept of using open-ended materials is particularly significant for my focal child, as Jensen (1998) and Eliot (2000) discussed that allowing children to have hands-on experiences with different kinds of materials is most important during the early years of childhood due to rapid brain development (as cited in Drew & Rankin, 2004). As my focal child is five-years-old, he is at the end of the process where his brain has developed a complex wiring system, and ultimately formed a unique foundation built on his experiences (Drew & Rankin, 2004). My observations with him allowed me to see how his brain processes the use of different open-ended materials to represent different objects and ideas depending on the play situation he created. The way in which he played with open-ended materials ultimately helped me in answering how his literacy developed based on his interactions with the materials.

### **Block Play**

The use of blocks during play allows children to gain exposure to different symbols as well as understand the purpose of these symbols. As blocks are considered to be one of many open-ended materials, and can be used to represent other objects, this enables children to give the blocks their own meaning (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). When children give meaning to different objects, they ultimately develop their learning. Additionally, Gregory, Kim, and Whiren (2003) explain that while observing children's block play, one can also recognize children's thought structure as they manipulate the blocks in various ways. Vygotsky (1967) explains that when children pretend that objects hold different meanings, it indicates a step towards mastering symbolic representation, which is a concept that is necessary for their reading and writing skills (as cited in Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). For instance, when children understand that objects represent something that has meaning, this allows them to make sense of alphabetic letters, and later be able to read and write these letters to create messages. Once children have understood

the meaning of different objects as symbols, their thinking has translated from a concrete form of thinking, to abstract thinking (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005).

Besides children making advancements in their understanding of symbols as well as in their ways of thinking, Isbell and Raines (1991) explain that block play also enables children to use more advanced oral language (as cited in Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). For instance, Halliday, McNaughton, and Glynn (1985) explain that when adults are near, or a part of the block play area, children are more likely to spend more time there and in turn increase their use of language due to the presence of the adults (as cited in Gregory, Kim, & Whiren, 2003). Wellhousen and Giles (2005) also explain that the time children spend playing with blocks leads to more language practice and production as they are given more freedom to improvise different roles and settings. Berk and Winsler (1995) explain that the act of spoken language illustrates higher mental functioning, as well as is considered to be the first step before they are able to internalize their thoughts (as cited in Gregory, Kim, & Whiren, 2003). The language production that occurs during play ultimately provides children opportunities to develop their higher mental functioning, as well as learn allow them to communicate their thoughts both externally and internally as they partake in these play scenarios.

The interactions with blocks during play allows children to do much more than build roads and towers, for it provides many opportunities for children to practice and develop language. These open-ended materials allow them to create endless play scenarios where their blocks represent many different objects, and therefore allow for abstract thinking to take place. In my research study, I observed the ways in which my focal child interacted with his blocks, as well as the language that he used during these interactions. The way in which he communicated

with himself and others as he used these open-ended materials helped me observe his language and literacy development.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

The concept of funds of knowledge, created by Vygotsky, pertains to the idea that individuals gain knowledge through their life experiences (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). In particular, this concept looks at the way families and cultures impact the different levels of knowledge each individual carries, and builds upon, throughout their lives. This knowledge is initially gained through the home environment, and then brought out into the world around them, such as in their school environments. Moll and Esteban-Guitart (2014) discuss how the funds of knowledge concept views families and communities as good educational resources, as people can learn from one another based on the different life experiences they each have had. Ultimately, there is something to be learned from everyone through these psychological tools, which influence human behavior, as no two people have the same funds of knowledge (Moll and Esteban-Guitart, 2014).

In terms of my research study, I observed how my focal child used his own funds of knowledge in his home environment as he was involved in many play situations. I recognized how the knowledge that he has gained through his home environment has impacted the type of play he does, as well as the language he uses as he plays. In addition, I observed how the funds of knowledge he has learned from school have transitioned into his home environment; he ultimately transfers knowledge from both school and home environments through his play.

### **Funds of Identity**

The funds of identity concept stems from the funds of knowledge concept, and is produced from the perspective of Vygotsky as well. This concept is described by Moll and

Esteban-Guitart (2014) as “the historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources that are essential for a person’s self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding” (p. 31). Ultimately, funds of knowledge transform into funds of identity once individuals use their knowledge and experiences to define themselves, therefore establishing an identity for themselves based on what they have experienced (Moll & Esteban-Guitart, 2014). Theorists believe that just as individuals have many funds of knowledge, they also have many different identities that vary based on situations. Individuals may have home, school, religious, political, and social identities; the type of environment and atmosphere affects the outward behaviors of individuals (Oyersman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

For my research study, I recognized how my focal child’s funds of identity were being used through his play during my observations. He was able to create a particular form of identity during the play interactions based on how he inhabited the roles that mattered to him (Moll & Esteban-Guitart, 2014). In my study, he was in the presence of his family whom he is very close with, as well as myself, who, although I am family, he is not as close with; he was also in his home environment which he knows very well. All of these factors influenced the identity that he portrayed through his play interactions.

### **Socio-Cultural Learning Theory**

The idea of socio-cultural learning, as discussed by Ratner (2002), surrounds Vygotsky’s approach about the mental functioning in individuals. Vygotsky believed in this internal “mediated process [that] is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts” (as cited in Lantolf, Thorne and Poehner, 2014, p. 207). Individuals use both existing, as well as new knowledge in order to regulate their behavior in different settings. More specifically, these internal developmental processes happen through participation of many kinds of settings,

including historically, culturally, and linguistically formed settings. These settings involve peer, family, and institutional contexts such as schools and work places (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2014). Based on the context in which individuals are placed, their knowledge assists them in processing how to behave based on what is going on around them. For instance, behavior varies from a home environment to a school environment, as well as from being around friends to being around family.

As people grow, their control over their language increases, which in turn affects the way in which they interact in a variety of social contexts. There are two types of language that grow as individuals develop: interpersonal language used for social interactions, and intrapersonal language used for internal thinking (Lantolf, 2000). Vygotsky viewed these two language functions as two pieces in human development. One piece is when the language is used in human interaction, and the other piece is when language is internalized (Kozulin, 2003). Individuals use these two types of language functions in order to act upon different situations. The more contexts people have been exposed to, the more they grow accustomed to how to use certain language in particular environments. For instance, an individual may use different language in a public school versus in a religious domain.

In terms of my research study, my focal child interacted with his family and me as he took part in different play situations. He used the context of his home environment, as well as being around familiar people in order to determine his behavior as he played. His home environment is the birth place of his funds of knowledge, as well as a place he feels safe and comfortable, which ultimately affected his type of behaviors.

**Mediation**

Stemming from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is the idea of a mediated mind.

Vygotsky explained this concept of mediation as the notion that

just as humans do not act directly on the physical world, but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity...we also use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships. (as cited in Lantolf, 2000, p. 1)

Vygotsky's theory illustrates the notion that children's development of higher order thinking is dependent on the accessibility and presence of mediating objects in their environment, such as symbolic objects (Kozulin, 2003). Children use symbolic objects in order to create a mediated relationship with the world around them. The objects that are included in this idea of mediation include numbers, music, art, and language (Lantolf, 2000). Language is, above all, one of the most important symbols that is used through mediation amongst human beings, as it is the way in which communication and expression of ideas are shared amongst one another. These symbolic objects are designed through different human cultures and are therefore passed down through time in order to continue to bring different meanings to various ways of life (Lantolf, 2000).

Along with this idea of the importance of objects as symbols, Vygotsky also believed that human minds are very intricate systems that integrate various symbols into higher, culturally shaped ways of thinking, which include intentional memory, planning, voluntary attention, problem solving, and learning (Lantolf, 2000). Ultimately, the more symbols that are understood, and used in day to day life, the more abstract thinking that can take place inside one's mind. This idea of abstract thinking also relates back to the idea that children transition from concrete to abstract thinking as they create meaning through play (Hatcher & Petty, 2004).

This concept of mediation ultimately expands on the importance that symbols have in our lives, including the use that these symbols have in order to transition our understanding to a higher, more abstract way of thinking. Each object or tool that is used in order to function in our daily lives all serve a purpose and represent different ideas. When we see a phone we see it as a means for contact and communication, when we see a house we see it a place where people find comfort and protection, and when we see a car we see it as a way to be transported to different destinations. This same idea relates to play as children use objects as symbols in order to create various play scenarios. The symbols that children use may either be symbols that they know and have seen in their lives or ones that they have created themselves in order to fit their assigned roles during play. For my own research study, my focal child illustrated his knowledge of different objects and tools through his language and how he perceived them in different ways. The objects that he used during play each symbolized something different for him, just as they may symbolize something different for another five-year-old, or perhaps for an adult. Every individual perceives particular objects as different symbols based on their knowledge and level of thinking, whether it is concrete or abstract thinking.

### **Inner Speech and Gesture**

McNeill (1992) discovered that the idea of communication, both through inner speech and outward gestures, is important in both social interactions as well as cognitive activity (as cited in Lantolf, 2000). The term, ‘gesticulation,’ stems from the topic of gesture and is the first of five gestural phases that lie on the continuum known as, ‘Kendon’s Continuum’ (McNeill, 1992). As it is the first of the five gestural phases, gesticulation is one of the most commonly used types of gestures and is seen through academic discourses, storytelling, and conversations. This type of gesture is also the gesture type that leads to verbal language itself, which illustrates

why gesticulation and verbal language are often used together (McNeill, 1992). This idea of gesture stems from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory as it focuses on the communication between others, or the idea of social interaction.

In terms of inner speech, McNeill's idea of gestures illustrates that inner speech is more than verbal gestures, and is significant in communication with others as well as within ourselves. As we communicate, part of it is done linguistically, while another part is done physically through gestures (Lantolf, 2000). This illustrates the idea that it is necessary to communicate with language not only verbally, but physically as well, for "in some cases the gestural signs may even override our verbally expressed intentions" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 16).

In terms of play, children communicate with themselves and their peers through both verbal communication as well as through physical body language. Especially with all of the activity involved with play, children are very gestural in terms of communicating roles, ideas, and the use of props involved in their play scenarios. During my observations with my focal child, he interacted with himself as well as with other individuals around him, which expressed his use of both inner speech and physical gestures. He used inner speech as well as outward speech in order to communicate what was going on during different play scenarios, and then used physical gestures to put these words into actions. These physical gestures also helped communicate how he felt during the play scenarios depending on the roles that he took on.

### **Summary**

There are several factors that impact the development seen in children as they partake in various play scenarios. One of the factors includes their environment, as the difference in appearance, space, and objects create different atmospheres, which then ultimately promotes new ideas and play behaviors. Another factor involves the types of objects used for children to

manipulate as they create their play scenarios. The objects children use all serve different purposes and are therefore presented as different types of symbols to children as they make meaning and use abstract thinking through play. Another factor that plays a role in children's development during play is their cognitive mindset. All children approach play scenarios differently based on their past and present cognitive experiences, as well as their levels of thinking. From this concept of cognitive mindsets stems the concepts of how children communicate during play, whether it is internal, external, or through physical gestures. Children communicate either with themselves or with others as they play in order to practice and develop language that they see and hear around them. As children partake in play, they are allowing themselves to grow and develop multiple literacy skills, which will impact their future interactions and behaviors.

### **Methodology**

By conducting this study, I found out how one five-year-old child develops his literacy skills in his home environment. Specifically, I assessed how my focal child's literacy development was impacted when playing independently, as well as playing collaboratively with others. Aside from interacting during play, I also assessed what types of play situations impacted particular literacy development: whether the focal child was playing with toys or props, or playing by himself or with others. All of these characteristics factored into my findings as I observed my focal child in multiple play situations over the course of five weeks. In relation to the study being done in the focal child's home environment, literacy learners most often use what they have learned in their home environment and apply it in a school setting (Moll, Gonzalez, & Amanti, 2005). Although he only attends preschool part-time, the skills he learns at home can be used as he advances through school, and what he learns in school he can also expand upon at

home. Based on my findings in his home environment, I concluded specific impacts that play has on children in terms of their development in literacy, including specific influences that help their development.

### **Participants**

There were three participants in my study. Each of the participants were addressed by pseudonyms in order to provide confidentiality. These individuals include my focal child, Cooper, and his mother and father, Katherine and Shane.

Cooper was selected as the focal child for this study due to his age, availability, and familiarity to me as he is a relative in my family. Specifically, Cooper is my second cousin. He is a Caucasian male and is four-years-old. English is Cooper's first and only language. When Cooper was two-years-old, he was not speaking at all. His parents hired a speech pathologist who came to their home and provide speech services to Cooper. By the time he was three-years-old, Cooper was using the normal amount of words as other typical three-year-olds. Since then, his language and vocabulary usage has continued to grow. He is considered to be of a middle-class socio-economic status, based on his mother and father's combined income. Cooper attends a preschool three days a week that is located in upstate New York. On the two days when he's not in school, he spends the day with his grandparents while his parents are at work. Besides attending school in upstate New York, he also lives in a small suburban town in upstate New York. Cooper lives in a neighborhood that includes many young, to middle aged families such as his own. He lives with his parents, Katherine and Shane, and his one-year-old sister, Cecelia. Cooper shows an immense amount of affection and protection over his sister. In terms of his personality, Cooper is a very happy and energetic child. When he is around those he is unfamiliar with, he will become more reserved and shy, but once he feels more comfortable in an

environment he will open up and interact with those around him. He especially enjoys baseball, trucks and super heroes.

Besides Cooper, Katherine and Shane were also chosen as participants in this study as they have a close personal relationship with Cooper, as well as due to their availability and familiarity to me, as they are my cousins. Katherine is my cousin by direct family relations, and Shane is my cousin by marriage. Katherine and Shane are both Caucasian, middle-aged individuals. They are both considered to be middle-class socio-economic status; Shane makes a higher income than Katherine as he helps run a family-owned business in their town. Both of these individuals are parents to not only Cooper, but also to their one-year-old daughter, Cecelia.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in the suburban home of my three participants, Cooper, Katherine, and Shane. Their home is a two-story house; the first story includes a living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom. The second story of their home includes a second bathroom and three bedrooms. They also have a fully finished basement. Outside of their house, they have a driveway, garage, back deck, in-ground swimming pool, as well as both a front and back yard. Cooper's toys are kept in the living room, upstairs in his bedroom, and downstairs in the basement. The majority of the observations took place in the living room, as this is the area where the family spends most of their time together. The toys in the living room include items such as board games, puzzles, toy cars, and blocks. In his bedroom, Cooper has several books, stuffed animals, and personal items including photographs and posters. The entire house is organized, clean, and very welcoming. On the outside of the kitchen refrigerator, there are dozens of pictures, magnets, and invitations taped to the doors. All around the house there are framed photographs of family members and friends. The living room, in particular, illustrates the

personality of the family as it houses the majority of Cooper's toys as well as baby items for his younger sister, Cecelia. They also have the television and iPad kept in this room, which both provide sources of entertainment for the family. All of these features of the house illustrate a friendly, warm feeling about the family as they show that their friends and family are important parts of their lives.

The community where Cooper and his family live is considered to be a suburban community and is not very demographically diverse. The community is composed of mainly Caucasian residents while there are only a few minority families. According to the US Census Bureau (2016), the individuals in this town are 87% Caucasian, "7.7% African-American, 6.2% Hispanic or Latino, 1.3% Asian," and 0.2% American Indian or Alaskan Native (p. 1). The median age of these residents is 42.7 years, according to the statistics from City-Data (2016). Whether the residents in the community are middle-aged, younger, or older, almost half of them are married, as City-Data (2016) indicates that 48.5% are currently living with a spouse. On the other hand, 30.9% of this population have never been married, and 10.8% have been divorced (City-Data, 2016). From these statistics, the community where Cooper and his family reside are similar to their own household; Cooper's family is nearing middle-age, married, and Caucasian.

### **Positionality**

As a relative of the three participants, I have the same demographics as I am Caucasian and a female. I also live in the same county in upstate New York, as well as in a community that is similar to theirs with many different young to middle-aged families. I am in my early 20's and I have received my Bachelor's degree in English from a local college, as well as received my New York State teacher's certification for first through sixth grade in both general and special education. Currently, I am continuing my education at the same institution where I received my

Bachelor's degree. As of August 2017, I will have completed my Master's program and will receive a Master's degree and certification in Literacy Education. While I work towards my Master's degree, I substitute teach in two local districts as well as continue to work as a teacher's assistant at a childcare center. Prior to these work experiences, I worked for a before and after school program, as well as a six-week summer camp program for three years. The work experiences I have had in the summer camp, before and after school program, childcare center, and as a substitute teacher have allowed me to be exposed to a variety of age ranges, as well as a variety of needs that each age requires. I have worked with children from three months to eighteen years old. This wide range of children has benefited my knowledge and learning experiences with children, and I have become comfortable in working with all ages, including various learning, social, and emotional needs.

In terms of this research study, besides being related to the focal child, I believe it is beneficial that I have had numerous experiences with children around Cooper's age. Due to my current and prior work experiences, I have existing knowledge about how five-year-old children play and interact. This knowledge gave me a foundation as I began my study with Cooper. I was also aware that every child interacts differently during play, so I knew to expect differences between Cooper and children from prior work experiences. I felt confident in my ability to observe, interact, and learn from Cooper as he played.

## **Methods**

For my qualitative research study, I used both interviews and observations in order to gather data and answer my three research questions. I conducted three interviews: one with Cooper and two with Cooper's parents. I also conducted 10 observations: four that included Cooper playing independently, with little to no interaction with others, and six that consisted of

Cooper playing collaboratively with others. During both the interviews as well as the observations, I used different methods of collecting and documenting the data that were drawn through each method.

The first interview was conducted with Cooper, and his parents were present upon his request. The interview consisted of five questions that surrounded his views on play as well as why he enjoys particular play activities. This interview lasted fifteen minutes. During the interview, I audio-recorded our conversation using my iPhone and later transcribed the recording into a Microsoft Word document on my laptop.

The other two interviews were conducted with Cooper's parents; the first interview with the parents was completed prior to the observations, and the second interview was done after the sixth observation. The first interview asked the parents questions pertaining to their existing knowledge about Cooper's play behaviors as well as the language that he uses during play. The second interview asked questions pertaining to what I had observed mid-way into the study as well as their thoughts on their son's play, literacy, and language that I had observed. Both of these interviews included five questions and were audio-recorded on my iPhone before being transcribed into Microsoft Word documents on my laptop. These interviews lasted approximately fifteen minutes.

This method of interviewing helped to answer all three of my research questions as Cooper and his parents allowed me insight into Cooper's typical behaviors during play. In particular, the interviews focused on the second research question about the types of play activities that promoted various types of his literacy development. The interviews discussed the play activities that the focal child engages in the most, the least, and what he enjoys, or doesn't enjoy about them. This provided me with information prior to the start of my observations, and I

therefore had an understanding of what behaviors to look for in his play activities, and the possible reasons behind these different behaviors.

The second type of data collection, the observations, took place over the course of five weeks with two observations occurring per week. Each observation lasted a maximum of thirty minutes. These observations were all audio-recorded on my iPhone and later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document on my laptop.

The first four observations involved me observing Cooper playing independently, with little to no interaction with other individuals. This play involved Cooper playing inside his house, in both the basement and living room, as well as the use of various toys and objects of Cooper's choosing. During these observations, I audio-recorded using my iPhone as well as typed notes into a double-entry journal on my laptop. On one side of the journal entry I wrote what I observed, and on the other side of the journal entry, I wrote my own thoughts and reflections about the observations.

The remaining six observations involved Cooper playing collaboratively with others. These observations included interactions with myself, his mother, his father, and his younger sister, Cecelia. This play involved Cooper playing indoors, and he used various toys and objects to play with others. During these observations, I audio-recorded using my iPhone, and later transcribed the recordings into Microsoft Word documents on my laptop. Since I was fully interacting with Cooper, I did not type notes into a double entry journal during the time of the observation, but still wrote down my thoughts and reflections into a double entry journal after I had transcribed each observation.

This method of observations helped me to answer all three of my research questions, as I was able to hear, see, and reflect on the ten observations. Owocki and Goodman (2002) discuss

how conducting observations with children enables a foundation “for engaging in systematic, yet very personalized, data collection in all areas of literacy” (p. xii). By seeing and hearing the behaviors of Cooper as he engaged in play, I addressed all three research questions. With the two types of interventions incorporated into the study, this data collection method specifically addressed the third research question about how the literacy development of the focal child was affected during independent and collaborative play, with and without other interactions. From this method, I had three types of data recordings, including audio-recordings, transcriptions, double entry journals, that allowed me to address this question and determine the affects that interactions had on Cooper during his play.

### **Procedures**

In order to begin this research study, I first gained approval of my research proposal. After the proposal was granted to begin my research study, I then gained parental consent for the parents to be used as participants in the study, as well as to allow their child to participate in the study. I also gained child assent for him to agree to be used as a participant in the study. This study took place over the course of five weeks, from January 28, 2017, to February 26, 2017.

I first began collecting data through the conduction of two interviews. The first interview took place with the parents, Katherine and Shane (Appendix A). This interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes and included five questions that focused on the focal child’s behaviors during play, including his language use as he engages in play. The second interview took place with Cooper (Appendix A). This interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes and included five questions that focused on what types of play activities Cooper enjoys the most, what he enjoys the least and what it is about these activities that he enjoys, or does not enjoy. Upon his request, this interview with Cooper was done in the presence of his parents. Both of

these interviews were audio-recorded on my iPhone, and then later transcribed over onto Microsoft Word documents on my laptop. Both my iPhone and laptop are password protected and therefore only I can access the contents on both devices.

After the completion of both interviews, I then began the first set of observations of Cooper. These observations occurred twice a week over the course of two weeks. They took place on the weekends between the hours of 10 o'clock in the morning and four o'clock in the afternoon. The first four observations included myself acting as a bystander as I watched and listened to Cooper play independently. His parents and younger sister were also present most of the time during these observations. The intervention for this first set of observations was that Cooper played on his own, with little to no interaction with other individuals. Any little interaction that took place included him asking his parents or myself questions, engaging in short conversations with his parents or me, and talking to his younger sister. During these observations, I audio-record Cooper using my iPhone. At the same time, I also used a double entry journal form on my laptop to type notes of my observations (Appendix B). These notes included both the observations that I witnessed, along with my thoughts and reflections on the observations.

The last set of six observations included a second intervention that involved Cooper playing collaboratively, and fully interacting with other individuals. These individuals included his parents, baby sister and myself. These observations occurred twice a week for three weeks. They occurred on the weekends between 10 o'clock in the morning and four o'clock in the afternoon. For each of these observations, I had Cooper choose what he wanted the two of us to play together. His parents and younger sister were able to join in if they wanted, or interact with

us as we played. During these observations, I audio-recorded our play interactions on my iPhone. The observations were later transcribed into double-entry journals on my laptop (Appendix B).

During the time of the second intervention of the observations, I also conducted a second parent interview (Appendix A). This interview occurred after the sixth observation. The interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes and consisted of five questions. These questions were created based on what I had observed mid-way through my observations with Cooper; the interview questions focused on the behaviors that I had noticed as Cooper played, as well as the insight the parents could offer in terms of what I had noticed in his play and language. This interview was audio-recorded on my iPhone and later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document on my laptop.

As I conducted both the interviews and observations, I frequently looked across all of my data in order to put together findings and conclusions pertaining to my three research questions. I also worked with my research partner and graduate advisor in order to check over my work and assist in reflecting upon my data.

### **Trustworthiness**

During this study, I established trustworthiness through the examination of my work by a research partner as well as my graduate advisor. These outside individuals reviewed my work critically in order to ensure there were no opinions, biases, or misuse of research that would affect the findings in this study. Throughout this study, I also used data triangulation in order to establish trustworthiness. According to Kimchi et al., (1991) this idea of data triangulation “has been defined as the combination of two or more theories, data sources, methods, or investigators in the study of a single phenomenon” (p. 364) The multiple forms of data that I used in this study allowed me to establish findings and draw conclusions in order to answer my three research

questions. From the interview with Cooper, the two interviews with Katherine and Shane, and the ten observations conducted with Cooper, there were several ways to triangulate my data and ultimately support the answers to my research questions.

Once I gathered all of my data, I analyzed it by using constant comparison across all of my data collection methods. According to Shagoury and Power (2012), constant comparison is a method of analyzing data that involves using information from several data categories over a long period of time. This information is then ultimately used in order to derive different theories based on the findings from the research (Shagoury & Power, 2012). In terms of my own research, I gathered data over the course of five weeks. The interviews in particular were conducted at the beginning of the five-week period, and again in the middle of the five weeks. I compared the answers in the child interview, both parent interviews and the dialogue that was transcribed from the ten observations.

I began analyzing my data by printing out physical copies of the interviews as well as the transcriptions in order to have all of the data in both electronic and physical formats. I first went through each observation transcription and used a coding and highlighting system in order to note patterns found throughout each transcription. I segregated each pattern by using a different color for each pattern found in the transcriptions. At the top of each transcription page, I created a key that explained which pattern each color represented. For instance, the color green stood for the instances when Cooper imitated language that was used around him. After I coded and highlighted each of the ten transcriptions, I then used the same coding procedure for each interview; I went through all three interviews and highlighted patterns that I found and created keys at the top of each page. Once all of my data were coded and highlighted, I created a list for each form of data: one list per observation transcription and one list per interview. These lists

included the patterns that were discovered among all 13 forms of data. I then went through and highlighted the patterns that were listed in more than one observation transcription and/or interview. I counted the number of times each highlighted pattern was found in the data in order to assess which patterns were seen the most frequently throughout the data, which allowed me to ultimately gather the major findings, or themes found throughout my research.

There were three major themes that emerged across my research: (1) play situations created through imitation, (2) self-directed speech used during independent play and (3) imaginative play is promoted through social interaction with peers. In order to organize the major themes in my research paper, I decided to order them based on the most frequently observed finding, to the least frequently observed finding. I began with discussing the theme of imitation. Since the finding of imitation was observed throughout my research in different forms, I created three sub-categories within this theme, which surrounded the use of imitation during play being used in different ways: through family experiences, through school experiences and through language. The second most frequent finding was how Cooper used self-directed speech during play. Cooper only used this form of speech during the first intervention of the study where he played independently. This intervention took place during the first four observations and therefore was not a pattern that was viewed continuously throughout the study. The third most frequent finding, and final theme of my research, was how Cooper used imaginative play during his social interaction with peers. The peer in which he used imaginative play with in this study was his younger sister, Cecelia.

## Data Analysis

### Introduction

The data in my research study were analyzed by looking across all three forms of my data collection methods: 10 double entry journals, 10 transcriptions from audio-recordings, and three interviews. As I read over the research from all three methods, I highlighted and coded several similar findings that were seen throughout each method. These findings were discovered throughout both interventions in my study; when Cooper had little to no interaction with other individuals as he played and when he had full interaction with other individuals during his play.

After my analysis, I discovered three significant findings illustrated in a majority of the data collection. The first finding I saw was that my focal child uses different forms of imitation throughout his play; there are three parts that are involved within this finding, which include (a) how he creates play situations through imitating family experiences, (b) how he creates play situations through imitating school experiences, and (c) how he creates play situations through imitating language. Another finding I discovered was that (d) my focal child uses self-directed speech during independent play to process his thoughts and ideas aloud, including directions, questions, and conversations created amongst himself. The last finding I interpreted in my data was that (e) my focal child's social interaction with his younger sister promotes imaginative play situations.

The first finding (a), that discusses how my focal child creates play situations through imitating family experiences, was discovered in four observations along with all three interviews, both parent and child. The second finding (b), discussing how my focal child creates play situations through the imitation of school experiences, was found in four observations as well as one parent interview and on child interview. The third finding (c), that discusses how my focal

child uses imitation through his language, was seen in five observations and one of the parent interviews. The fourth finding (d), which discusses how my focal child uses self-directed speech during independent play, is seen in two observations. The fifth finding (e), discussing how social interaction with my focal child and his peers promotes imaginative play, was discovered in three observations, one parent interview and the child interview.

### **Play Situations Created Through Imitation**

This finding was seen through three different forms of imitation: (a) imitating family experiences, (b) imitating school experiences and (c) imitating language. Vygotsky discussed that in order for individuals to internalize information, they rely on their ability to imitate intentional human activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Through imitation, individuals can process and store information, allowing them to learn through their actions. Imitation is an action that “involves goal directed cognitive activity that can result in transformations of the original model” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 203). Throughout my study, I observed Cooper imitating many different actions physically and verbally based on what was going on around him. Rather than imitate these actions exactly as they were done by another individual, he was able to turn them into his own interpretations of the action and ultimately use these imitative gestures creatively throughout his play.

Below is a table that indicates the number of times each form of imitation occurred across the different data collection sessions. This table illustrates the frequency of imitation behaviors that Cooper displayed during the research study:

	<b>Imitating Family Experiences</b>	<b>Imitating School Experiences</b>	<b>Imitating Language</b>
<b>Observation 1</b>		X	
<b>Observation 2</b>		X	
<b>Observation 3</b>	X	X	X
<b>Observation 4</b>			X
<b>Observation 5</b>			X
<b>Observation 6</b>			
<b>Observation 7</b>			
<b>Observation 8</b>	X		X
<b>Observation 9</b>	X	X	X
<b>Observation 10</b>	X		
<b>Child Interview</b>	X	X	
<b>Parent Interview 1</b>	X		
<b>Parent Interview 2</b>	X	X	X

*Figure 1.* Table indicating the amount of data collections where imitation was observed and/or discussed in interviews.

**Play situations were created through imitation of family experiences.** During my observations I observed Cooper imitating different experiences he has shared with his family and use those experiences to influence his play situations. I found that he imitated these experiences during the first intervention where he played with little to no interaction with others, as well as during the second intervention where he fully interacted with other individuals.

One of the experiences I observed Cooper imitating was during my third observation, on February 4, 2017, where he had little to no interaction with others. During this time, he used building blocks, called Mega Bloks, to build a monster truck garage. When he began his

structure, he did not tell anyone what he was making and began building tall and low structures that connected with one another. His mom finally asked, “What are you building?” Cooper then replied, “A garage for the monster trucks.” His parents explained to me that the previous day he had gone to see “Monster Jam,” a monster truck show, with his grandfather. Since Cooper had just gone to see a show with monster trucks, he connected this real life experience to his play and imitated the idea of monster trucks. He turned this concept of monster trucks into his own interpretation as he created a garage that would fit these large vehicles. Cooper then began to build parking spaces and filled them with several different size trucks.



*Figure 2.* Monster truck garage built with Mega Bloks.

Although Cooper did not see an actual monster truck garage, the idea for his play came from seeing the monster trucks at the Monster Jam show. He then was able to create his own game with the monster trucks and ultimately make a structure that would house the giant trucks. As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) stated, imitation involves transforming actions from an original

model. The original model in this case was the monster trucks, and Cooper transformed this idea into something that he could bring to life in his own very own living room.

During the second parent interview, which took place after the sixth observation, on February 12, 2017, I shed light on the idea of Cooper using imitation throughout his play. At this point in the study, I had already witnessed several instances where he used imitations in his actions and wanted to hear his parents' thoughts about what they observed as well:

**Me:** I've noticed that when he plays he imitates a lot of things that he's experienced through his play, like when he did the car shop, or even when he's speaking. I was wondering what other things you've seen him imitate, like anything else that he's seen or done?

**Shane:** Everything. Like for the longest time he would pretend to mow the yard. He has his own mower and would do the exact same thing I did, like turning...everything. Shoveling snow...

**Katherine:** Yeah, he got two trucks out and told Shane that one had to be the salter and one had to be the paver, so he's imitating what Shane does.

**Shane:** It could be anything. Like if I'm throwing salt on the driveway he figures out how to throw salt on the driveway.

**Me:** So would you say he uses things from real life more when he plays, or he makes things up?

**Shane:** No I think he likes to grab things and make them into something else.

At the conclusion of this interview, my observation and interpretation of Cooper's imitation was solidified based on the response of his parents. Cooper had demonstrated, not only to me through my observations, but many times in the presence of his parents, his ability to

process the actions he sees other individuals do, and imitate them to fit his own play scenarios. Even at his young age, Cooper quickly picks up on actions going on around him and processes them in order to combine reality and creativity through his play. Meltzoff and Moore (1994) discuss how individuals can learn to imitate as young as infancy, for the cognitive functions that allow for imitation are present right from birth. They have explained that through many experimental studies, it has been proven that by observing adults, children learn in a different and very powerful way (as cited in Want & Harris, 2002). Cooper watches what his parents do, as well as other individuals around him, and uses those actions to influence the play scenarios that he creates for himself. These scenarios are created either on his own, or with others.

Cooper also imitated experiences he has shared with family while playing with his toy cash register. During the interview I had with Cooper, before I began my observations, I had learned that the cash register was one of Cooper's favorite toys:

**Me:** Why is the cash register one of your favorite toys?

**Cooper:** Well, everything. There's people here and I ask they (them) to get some stuff and I cash it.

**Katherine:** You cash people out?

**Cooper:** Yes.

**Shane:** Sometimes he'll get different toys and use the scanner on them.

**Me:** So like you're at Wegmans?

**Cooper:** Yes, I ask they (them) what's their phone number and what's their house number.

**Shane:** So he can punch them (the numbers) in on the cash register.

From the interview I discovered that Cooper imitated actions that he has seen cashiers do in stores, as well as find other ways to use the cash register. By punching phone numbers and house numbers into the cash register, Cooper goes further than simply scanning items and cashing out customers. Just as with the monster truck garage, he imitated something he has experienced in real life and added on his own creativity to the play situation.

During my tenth observation with Cooper, on February 26, 2017, where he was able to fully interact with others, he took on the role of a cashier and requested that I take on the role of a customer buying groceries. He took what he had seen and heard cashiers doing in stores and transformed them into his own play scenario. Cooper first had me go shopping for different pretend food items in his living room. When I had found all the items I wanted to purchase, I brought them to his register and he scanned each item. After scanning them, he rang up my total and we exchanged both pretend dollar bills and coins. During one of the instances where he cashed me out, he had me use a credit card, which he inserted into the credit card scanner. After buying food items a couple of different times, Cooper suggested that I also purchase other items such as toys or books, as long as they had a bar code on the back for him to scan. I found different objects around his living room that had bar codes and brought them to his register where he would once again cash me out. During one of the times where he was waiting for my credit card to scan, he got his dad involved in the play scenario by assigning him the role of a worker in the store:

**Cooper:** *\*into microphone\** Clean up on aisle three and aisle four, thank you!

**Me:** What are they cleaning up?

**Cooper:** Some milk and some juice. Juice spilled on number four and milk spilled on number three.

**Me:** They better get someone over there quick!

*\*Shane got up and used a plastic mop to clean the floor.\**

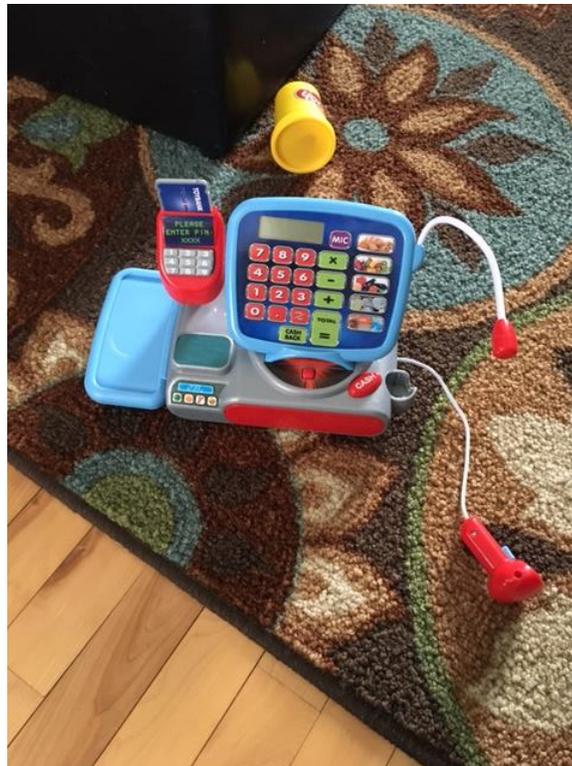
**Cooper:** Are you finished cleaning up aisle three and aisle four?

**Shane:** Yes.

**Cooper:** Alright. *\*into microphone\** Now clean up aisle five and aisle six, thank you.

**Me:** Is my card ready yet? *\*referring to credit card in credit card reader\**

**Cooper:** No. You gotta wait til the beep comes...beep!



*Figure 3.* Toy cash register used to imitate a cashier and customer play scenario.

Whether Cooper was playing on his own, or with others, I discovered, through both observations and interviews, that Cooper imitates experiences he has shared with his family during a majority of his play. By imitating different actions, he is building his literacy skills as he practices using both verbal and internal language through his cognitive processes. The imitation of different roles that he has encountered with his family allows him to listen to, process, and

verbalize different literacies. For instance, he used particular literacies in order to build a monster truck garage and other particular literacies needed to take on the role of a cashier. He internally processes different actions that he sees, imitates them on his own, transforms them into his own version, and ultimately creates an understanding of these roles that are unique to him. By going through these actions as he plays, he is building many different literacy skills both internally and externally. Above all, he is expanding his knowledge based on his experiences as well as what he transforms them into; the more Cooper is exposed to, and ultimately imitates during play, the wider his literacy skills become.

**Play situations were created through imitation of school experiences.** Throughout my research study I discovered that Cooper not only imitated experiences he had shared with his family, but experiences that he has had at school as well. This is Cooper's first year attending preschool and, based on my observations, he is already applying what he has learned in school at home through his play scenarios.

For instance, the very first observation I did with Cooper, on January 28, 2017, where he had little to no interaction with others, involved him imitating actions involving either a teacher or student at a white board. During my observation I typed notes into a double entry journal as he played by himself:

*Writes letters on white board with crayon (talks quietly to self) ...walks around asking self what to do next...goes back to white board and continues writing letters (while sitting on bean bag chair) ...whispers to self before writing different letters on board...says to self: "letters," "periods in the sentence," "I'm doing science" ...draws two rectangles.*

Cooper imitated more than one type of learning through his play actions as he wrote numbers, letters and shapes on the white board. He also referred to the subject of science when he drew the shapes, as I discovered that the science center in his classroom involves numbers and shapes. Now that Cooper has experienced what school is like, he is able to apply what he has learned and experienced in school in other contexts such as in his home environment. This also illustrates how his learning extends beyond his classroom walls as he expands upon it through his play scenarios.

For my second observation with Cooper, on January 29, 2017, he again applied and imitated what he is learning in school during his play. He played on his own for this observation, and in this instance he chose to play on his family's iPad. I had expected him to open up a game application, as he has several on the iPad, but instead he opened up Siri to look up different information on Google. During this time Cooper was very quiet and focused on what he was doing on the iPad, which was very different behavior than some of the following observations. He was very interested in the information that he was finding on Google. I again typed notes into a double entry journal as he interacted with the iPad:

*Asks Siri, "What's the weather gonna be like today?" ...asks Siri, "What's a hippo's favorite food?" ...asks Siri, "How fast are rhinos?" ...video of rhinos came up on Google, he watched the video...asks Siri, "How fast is a sheep?" (didn't give correct answer so he had to re-word it and ask again) ...asks Siri, "How fast does a sheep run?"*

Cooper continued to ask Siri questions related to different animals. His mother explained to me that he was currently learning about animals in school, which helped to explain his interest in looking up information about how fast animals ran, what their favorite foods were, as well as watching videos that showed more information pertaining to each animal. When Google would

answer the questions that Cooper asked, it sometimes brought up videos of the animals in action, which Cooper would watch. This observation enabled me to once again see how his school experiences influence his play.

The idea of Cooper imitating his school experiences was discussed in both a parent interview as well as the child interview. When I interviewed Cooper before the observations began, he implied that he enjoys playing using school experiences. At the time I had not realized what it meant, for I had been looking for an answer to a completely different question:

**Me:** So do you like playing with toys better or playing pretend games where you use your imagination and make it up?

**Cooper:** A little bit of both. I do kinda different things like I follow what Mrs. Moore says and we do science at school and I kinda do science here.

**Me:** So you do science in school and then you like to do it at home?

**Cooper:** Yes.

**Shane:** What's science?

**Cooper:** Numbers and shapes.

Cooper explained that he transfers the same kind of learning and activities that he does in school, with his teacher and peers, in his home environment. When I saw these activities occur during my observations, which he had explained in his interview, it illustrated the significance that school has in terms of Cooper's play situations. It helped me understand what he enjoys doing and learning about in school in order for him to then want to imitate the same things at home as well.

Cooper's enjoyment for interacting with the area of science was illustrated in the ninth observation, on February 25, 2017, as he created and sequenced different numbers using play

dough. He used different number cut-out tools for the play dough in order to make the numbers. I assisted him as he used the play dough to mold the numbers, but he sequenced the numbers in the right order completely on his own:

**Cooper:** I'm gonna make numbers. Zero first.

**Cooper:** Now one.

**Cooper:** There's the one. Now where's the two?

**Cooper:** Two sounds like chew.

**Cooper:** Okay now I need three.

For the rest of the observation Cooper continued to make and sequence the numbers all the way up through number nine. When he found the cut-out for a number that did not come directly after the one he had just made, I would ask him what number(s) should go in-between them in order to help him problem solve to find a missing number(s). I wanted to use this opportunity to see the extent of Cooper's knowledge of numbers.



*Figure 3:* Cooper creating and sequencing numbers with play dough.

During the second parent interview I brought up my observation of Cooper imitating different scenarios as he played. His parents were aware of how often Cooper imitated different actions, and were able to provide even further insight into what he chooses to imitate. Besides experiences Cooper has shared with his family, his mother and father provided me further insight into the experiences he imitates that are related to school:

**Katherine:** He plays school...he imitates what happens at school. Like he's got a book from his birthday that everyone drew a picture for him in, so he puts it on the refrigerator and turns it to a different page every day because that's what the angel helper does; they have an angel helper in their classroom.

**Shane:** We have our own computer and he likes to look at images like trucks or different things and he'll ask what letters to press in order to spell out trucks.

Katherine was able to explain how Cooper imitates different routines that he experiences every day in his classroom. Since there are different daily jobs and routines in Cooper's preschool environment, he has gotten used to seeing them regularly and continues to transfer that routine into his home environment. This also has personal meaning to Cooper as he received a book for his birthday from his classmates and teacher, which helps to illustrate the significance of this daily routine. Shane discussed a skill that Cooper has learned at school, which he has now transferred over to his home environment, as he is learning how to use a keyboard to spell different words. By transferring this skill into his home environment, he is able to practice and become more proficient at typing and spelling different words. He uses his interests in order to drive his learning as well, as his father described how he searches images of trucks.

By imitating different school experiences throughout his play, Cooper demonstrates development in his literacy skills as he uses verbal and written language to portray the learning

that takes place in his classroom. His imitation abilities require him to listen to what takes place in school and process them internally before he acts them out externally. He illustrates his understanding of letters, numbers and shapes during his play, which he has taken from school, and use them in a creative way through his play. For instance, he practices his knowledge of number sequencing through writing on a white board as well as using the open-ended material of play dough. The different literacy skills that he has learned and applied in his school environment are transferred over, and expanded upon in his home environment. He practices the way that he uses his speaking and writing literacies at home as he imitates various scenarios that occur in his classroom setting. As Cooper practices these skills during his play, his literacy development will continue to grow in and out of school in different aspects.

**Play situations were created through imitation of language.** Besides imitating family and school experiences that he has had, Cooper also uses imitation in terms of the language that he hears others use, and uses that language during his play scenarios. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), imitation is a major factor in language acquisition. Throughout my observations I heard Cooper imitate both of his parents, his younger sister, and myself. There were instances where Cooper imitated exactly what was said and there were times where he applied certain parts of speech to his own language structure. It is noted by Speidel and Nelson (1989) that imitation involves both neurological and motor processing as the individual selectively chooses what to imitate (as cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Since Cooper selects the language he imitates, he connects different meanings to the language he hears, and then uses himself. If he does not make any connection to the language he hears, he will choose not to imitate it.

In my eighth observation of Cooper, on February 19, 2017, he and I were playing a game of bingo together when I observed that he imitated certain parts of language that I used in

relation to the game. This particular bingo game was a Shopkins version, and there were images of different food items on the different squares, rather than numbers. The columns were still labeled B, I, N, G, and O. Throughout the game I had Cooper explain how to play this version of bingo and used my own knowledge of bingo as we played:

**Me:** So you can put a chip on your board...under the G column, and put it on the strawberry.

**Cooper:** The G column. Okay, your turn!

**Me:** Do you have a donut in the B column?

**Cooper:** Do I have a donut in the B column? Um, yes.

I used my own previous knowledge of bingo as I explained where Cooper was to put one of his chips, as I used the term, “column.” This may have been a term that Cooper had not used often, and so he then imitated the term in order to gain an understanding in relation to the game. By imitating the phrases I used during this interaction, it allowed Cooper to understand how to respond to me by looking at his board to determine where to place his chip, as well as see what food items he had in certain columns. In this particular play scenario, I used language that was specifically related to the game, and Cooper imitated me in order to build his own understanding as well as help him play the game.

There was another instance, during my fourth observation, on February 5, 2017, where Cooper used language in relation to receiving a phone call. This particular observation involved Cooper building with his blocks, but the language that he overheard, that was not related to his blocks, influenced him to create a small play situation separate from his blocks. While he was building with his blocks, his mother’s phone rang and she answered it, proceeding to have a short

conversation with Cooper's father. Cooper then imitated the typical language used when talking on the phone:

**Cooper:** *\*pretends to hold a phone up to ear\** Hello? This is Paul. Um, yes I'll come to school. Okay, bye! *\*puts the pretend phone away\** School was calling.

In this particular scenario, Cooper used the language around him to influence his play. Even though he was playing with something that was not related to answering a phone, the events going on around him in his home environment tore him away from his own play scenario for a short time. He demonstrated his prior understanding of answering a phone, as well as his understanding of having short conversations on the phone. He created his own phone conversation about going to school, even though his mother's phone conversation involved what his father needed to purchase at the grocery store. Although Cooper did not imitate the exact phone conversation he heard his mother have, he used the action of a phone call to influence the language that he used during his play.

During the second interview with Cooper's parents, I was able to gain more insight on Cooper's language abilities, for I was extremely interested, and somewhat in awe, as to the different ways he used language. I had noticed not only the way he imitated language, but the way he used a very formal language structure for an individual at such a young age:

**Me:** I've noticed that Cooper uses very formal, or mature language. I was wondering what you could tell me about this, for instance when did he start it, and how often does he use it? Is it during certain times, or all the time?

**Katherine:** I don't know when he started because he had speech therapy up until he was three, so at two he wasn't really talking a lot, but then once he started getting speech

therapy, it [his speech] didn't stop. He does pick up on everything that we say, he doesn't miss a beat with that.

*\*Shane brings Cici downstairs from a nap.\**

**Cooper:** Hi, little stinky pot. (*"Stinky pot" is language he previously heard his parents use for Cici.*)

**Me:** Yeah, I've noticed he imitates a lot.

**Katherine:** Yeah I think that's where it comes from. I think he listens to what everybody says.

When I had thought of this particular question prior to the interview, I had not anticipated that the concept of imitation would once again factor into Cooper's play, this time in the form of his language. I had anticipated to hear about one specific reason that Cooper uses such formal language, but what I discovered was that Cooper has acquired his language abilities through many different reasons; these reasons are through the various ways in which he imitates language he hears others use. His parents understand that Cooper listens to, and uses, the language that he hears them use, which they believe is a major factor for his language abilities. The understanding that Cooper received speech intervention also may factor into the format of language, though I did not research the effects of his one-on-one speech lessons. Even during the parent interview, Cooper imitated language he had heard his parents use before when he referred to his younger sister as a, "stinky pot." The fact that his parents and I both observe the same characteristics in Cooper in terms of his language helped to solidify my finding.

When Cooper imitates language he hears around him, his speaking literacy skills grow as he is exposed to new vocabulary as well as new contexts in which language is used. By imitating other adults who have large vocabularies and more developed literacies, Cooper's language is

then impacted as he imitates what he hears. These more developed literacies that he chooses to imitate will also ultimately help his reading literacy skills grow as well. When Cooper comes across specific words, or specific contexts in different texts, he has the previous knowledge that he gained through imitation in order to support him as he reads. The more that Cooper uses language, whether through imitation or on his own, the more literate he will become along with exposing him to many new ideas.

### **Self-Directed Speech Used During Independent Play**

During the first four observations, I implemented the first intervention, which involved Cooper having little to no interaction with others as he played. While he was asked to play on his own and ultimately create his own play situations, I discovered that half of these observations involved him self-directing his thoughts, questions, and conversations aloud during his play.

In the first observation, on January 28, 2017, Cooper pretended that he was in school as he interacted with a white board in his basement. On the white board he completed various activities including writing numbers and letters, and drawing shapes. Throughout his interaction with the white board he communicated his thoughts and next steps aloud as he played:

**Cooper:** Let's do some numbers! Okay... *\*writes numbers one through five on white board\**

**Cooper:** Okay, what science are we gonna do? I know, we're gonna do letters. Time for letters...U... *\*whispers more letters to self as he writes them on white board\**

**Cooper:** Okay umm...now we're gonna...lemme see here...what are we gonna do?  
*\*draws two rectangles on white board\**

**Cooper:** Okay, so far we did...

Rather than use inner speech (McNeill, 1992) the entire time that he played on his own, Cooper demonstrated his ability to process his thoughts more easily by thinking aloud and using self-directed speech to make decisions. Although he was not talking to anyone, he showed how talking through what he was doing, or going to do, helped him to make sense of his play. Berk and Garvin (1984) claim that children frequently communicate with themselves aloud, whether they are involved in play or not (as cited in Lupyan & Swingley, 2011). Lupyan and Swingley (2011) further this idea by explaining how language is not just a tool that is used for communication, but as a way to change the way in which individuals think and process the world around them. As Cooper used language by himself during play, he was not doing so in order to communicate with anyone in particular, but to help him think about the situation he created and decide what he wanted to do next. Along with the observation that Cooper uses verbal processing skills as he plays, is the idea that these skills help him to make decisions, understand what he is doing, and gain a perspective on the reasoning behind his actions.

During my fourth observation, on February 5, 2017, as Cooper again played with little to no interaction with others, Cooper built a car shop using Mega Bloks. In his car shop, he also built several different parking spaces to be able to park his cars. When the cars were not parked in their assigned spaces, they would go into the shop in order to be repaired. As Cooper was playing, he had a conversation with himself from two different perspectives; he spoke as a worker at the car shop who directed cars in to get fixed, as well as the drivers of the different cars:

**Cooper:** (worker) Someone can go in the shop, and I know the perfect one. Hey I know where you can go, there. Go behind here and park right here. There you go.

**Cooper:** (worker) You wanna go front or back?

**Cooper:** (driver) Back.

**Cooper:** (worker) Okay, back it is.

**Cooper:** (driver) I mean front.

**Cooper:** (worker) Okay front is good. I know the perfect parking spot.

**Cooper:** (driver) Beep, beep.

**Cooper:** (worker) Where you guys going, back or front?

**Cooper:** (driver) Back.

**Cooper:** (worker) Okay.

**Cooper:** (worker) You can go in this side, whatever one you want. Okay, this side it is.

Go right here.

Since Cooper was playing on his own without any interaction with others, he assumed the role of both characters he had created through his car shop. He created the dialogue based on his own thoughts and ideas of how he wanted his play situation to become reality. Lupyan and Swingley (2011) discuss that “words do not simply map onto concepts, but actually change them, affecting nonverbal cognition and...even modulating ongoing perceptual processing” (p. 1069). Cooper’s fictional dialogue not only connected with knowledge about cars and car shops, but they also expanded upon this knowledge by turning them into situations that were uniquely his based on his cognition. He used his previous knowledge about car shops as well as his own ideas, about what he wanted the situation to look like, in order to decide what type of communication to have with himself. He took the structure of the car shop into consideration as he directed the cars into the back or front of the shop, and also considered the appearance and size of the cars when he decided which side they would enter the shop.

By using self-directed speech during his play, Cooper demonstrates his literacy development as he practices verbal language through his external thought processes. As he talks aloud to himself during play, he is going back and forth between his internal and external ideas. By doing so, he is using language internally and externally in order to put his thoughts to action. The more Cooper uses any kind of speech, whether it is self-directed or with peers, he is building his literacy skills through his continuous use of speech.

### **Imaginative Play is Promoted Through Social Interaction with Peers**

Throughout my observations I noticed that Cooper created imaginative play scenarios only when he was interacting with his younger sister, Cecelia. I refer to his sister as a “peer,” for she is the closest in age to Cooper, while his parents and me are much older than him. When Cooper interacted with any of the adults in the room, he created play scenarios that were based off of a toy, or game that was being played with at that time. With his younger sister, he would involve her in a few different short play scenarios without the use of any toy or game; Cooper would create an imaginary play scenario that involved only himself and Cecelia.

For instance, during the end of my fourth observation with Cooper, on February 5, 2017, he had finished building with his blocks and then became interested in what his sister was doing. Cecelia had began crawling closer to where he was building with his blocks and he suddenly created an imaginary play scenario where she was a polar bear, and he was trying to get away from her:

**Cooper:** It’s the polar bear! *\*goes behind couch\**

**Cooper:** *\*hides behind couch\** Here comes the polar bear! Wanna fight, polar bear?

**Cooper:** *\*runs out from behind couch\** I gotta get outta here!

In the sixth observation, on February 12, 2017, Cooper involved Cecelia in another imaginary play scenario where he pretended that she was his prisoner by wrapping his legs around her as she sat on the floor. He then transformed into a puppy and began panting and crawling around on his hands and knees:

**Cooper:** I'm gonna get you! You're trapped! *\*wraps legs around her\**

**Cooper:** You're my prisoner, you can't go anywhere!

**Cooper:** *\*pants like a dog/gets on all fours/gets in Cici's face\**

**Cooper:** I'm a puppy. Woof woof!

In these play scenarios Cecelia influenced Cooper's imaginative play through social interaction as she crawled closer to him as he was playing. Although Cecelia could not respond back to Cooper, she enabled Cooper to create a different form of play that he did not create with his parents or me. When Cooper and I would play together he would choose an object to play with, such as a board game or an interactive toy. The proximity in age as well as size may factor into why he chooses to play with Cecelia differently than he does with adults. Also, as Cecelia is still too young to interact much with Cooper, it makes it easier for him to create scenarios that he wants to play rather than having to ask someone to play something he is interested in.

After I had noticed Cooper's frequent imaginative interaction with Cecelia, I asked about this idea in the second parent interview in order to gather insight from Cooper's parents:

**Me:** I've noticed that Cooper likes to interact with Cecelia a lot during his play. I was wondering what types of things you usually see him doing with her?

**Shane:** He tries to grab her and get her to play. I think what he does, going back to the imitation thing, is he watches what we do and how we say, "woo-woo," in her face, and then he does the same thing. He gets more into it, he wants to pull her over and stuff.

Just as I had observed in my observations, Cooper's father confirmed the idea that Cooper does in fact try to get Cecelia to become a part of his play scenarios. The times that I observed Cooper interacting with her in imaginary play scenarios, he would get close to her each time, which his father also indicated that he notices as well. When Cooper gets closer to Cecelia, he tries to get her to join in and become a part of his play. I also discovered, from this interview question, that Cooper again uses imitation while interacting with Cecelia. He imitates actions that he sees his parents use, as well as language that they use around Cecelia.

Prior to the start of the observations, I asked Cooper during his interview about whether he preferred to play on his own or with others. This information would then be useful when applying the two different interventions where he had two different levels of interaction with others as he played:

**Me:** Do you like to play with other people or by yourself?

**Cooper:** At school or at home?

**Me:** Both.

**Cooper:** I play with two friends at school. Their names are Austin and Aidan.

**Me:** What about at home?

**Cooper:** Cici, much. (a lot)

**Me:** What about mommy and daddy?

**Cooper:** Most I like to play with daddy 'cause we tessele (wrestle) downstairs.

Cooper explained that he prefers to have social interaction when he plays, whether it is with his friends at school or with his family members at home. Specifically, Cooper noted that he enjoys playing with Cecelia a lot, which explained all of the imaginative play scenarios he created with her throughout my observations. Fleer (2011) discusses the idea that "...imagination is a

collective historical experience that even very young children can be lifted into with...play partners” (p. 227). As Cooper uses his imagination during play, he is exposed to new ideas and experiences through the social interaction with his sister. Cooper is ultimately able to benefit much more by interacting with others, versus playing on his own.

By socially interacting during his play, Cooper is developing his verbal literacy skills as he communicates with one or more individuals. Depending on the dialogue that is communicated back and forth, Cooper is able to practice using different verbal and physical language tools in order to convey meaning through different play scenarios. Interaction involves both verbal and physical means, as well as internal processing. As he interacts with others, he also incorporates the development of his listening and thinking literacy skills as he processes how to respond to different situations during play. The more Cooper interacts with others, the more literacy skills he is able to develop due to the multiple aspects that interaction and communication involve. Whether Cooper interacts with children his age, his younger sister, or adults at home, he continues to build his literacy skills as he uses his internal and external language abilities.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

This research study focused on the concepts of play and literacy development and how these two concepts relate to one another. In order to dissect this relationship, this study focused on one major research question and two sub-questions:

- How might play impact one five-year-old child’s literacy development in a home environment?
  - What types of play activities help to promote reading, writing, speaking, and listening development in the focal child?

- How is the literacy development of the focal child affected when he plays independently, with little to no interaction, as well as collaboratively, with full interaction with others?

Through my five-week research study, which involved observations and interviews, I found three major findings that helped to answer my research questions, and illustrated the relationship between play and literacy development within my particular focal child. The three major findings included a) the creation of play situations through imitation of home experiences, family experiences, and language, b) self-directed speech used during independent play and c) social interaction with peers promotes imaginative play situations.

My first major finding, of how my focal child uses imitation to influence his play, was seen the most frequently throughout my study, as well as appeared in three different forms of imitation: family experiences, school experiences, and language. In this concept, children do not simply say and do the exact actions they observe adults doing, for imitation involves them transforming the original model and molding it to their own particular situation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Cooper learned physical and verbal skills through observing individuals at home and at school, and was able to transform his observations in order to coincide with the play scenarios he created. The second major finding included how my focal child used the concept of self-directed speech during his independent play activities; this finding only occurred when there was no interaction with others. Besides simply being a tool for communication, language changes the way individuals cognitively and perceptually process their thoughts. (Lupyan & Swingley, 2012). Cooper is an individual who processes his thoughts aloud using self-directed speech in order to help him process information as he played independently. Lastly, the third major finding surrounded the idea that Cooper's social interaction with his peers, in this case his

younger sister, promoted him to partake in imaginative play situations. Imagination does not just involve internal processes, but includes conscious and social acts that involve outward interactions between individuals (Fleer, 2011). Cooper used his subconscious, imaginative ideas and brought them to life when he interacted with his younger sister.

### **Conclusions**

**Cooper's imitation of different experiences during play helps develop his reading, writing, speaking, and listening literacy skills through independent and collaborative play.**

This finding of imitation was not only observed the most frequently throughout my observations, but ultimately demonstrated the greatest literacy development during Cooper's play interactions. As there were three different types of imitation during Cooper's play, each of them illustrated at least one type of literacy skill that was being developed. Cooper developed his reading literacy skill as he read his writing on the whiteboard, the numbers that he created with play dough and the screen on his cash register. Although Cooper may not have read these different pieces of writing at a proficient level, his imitation showed that he knew what the act of reading different materials looked and sounded like. As imitation is goal directed behavior, Cooper understood the meaning behind his actions as he read, or pretended to read during his play (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). His writing literacy skills also developed as he imitated his school experience at the whiteboard. Here, he wrote letters, numbers and drew different shapes. Dever and Wishon (1995) explain that through play, children are provided opportunities to assimilate the skills that they are learning pertaining to print functions and conventions (as cited in Hatcher & Petty, 2004). Cooper took what he and his peers are learning about print concepts in school and practiced them further in his home environment. His development of his speaking and listening skills went hand in hand as he imitated language during his play interactions. The language that

he imitated was based off of words and phrases that he had previously heard others use in different contexts. Haywood and Perkins (2003) state that “children often use vocabulary and syntax that mimic the adult speech they hear around them” (as cited in Hatcher & Petty, 2004, p. 80). Cooper extends upon his own vocabulary and comprehension as he imitates words and phrases he has heard, and uses them to fit his play based on the context of his different play situations. His listening skills developed as he collaborated with others and listened to the language they spoke in order to either respond to it, or imitate it in his own way. Since the act of imitation involves an individual basing their own actions and language off of previous observations, by watching and listening to others, Cooper continues to practice and develop the skills that others demonstrate (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Adults in particular demonstrate proficient literacy skills due to their wider range of experiences, so the more that Cooper imitates these adult experiences, the further his literacy skills will develop.

**Self-directed speech allows Cooper to develop his speaking and listening literacy skills through independent play.** During the time spent partaking in independent play, Cooper used self-directed speech to process his thoughts and ideas aloud during different play scenarios. According to McIntyre and Hellsten (2004), speaking and listening skills are both used in oral language in order to provide communication and ultimately lay the foundation for emergent literacy (as cited in Heppner, 2016). Based on this idea, Cooper’s speaking and listening literacy skills proved to be the most developed through this interaction with himself, as this interaction involves language spoken and listened to aloud. Cooper would practice speaking questions, dialogue and ideas by talking aloud to himself during different play situations. After speaking these thoughts aloud, he would listen to his ideas and then externally and internally process them in order to respond to himself. This concept of internal language is known as the practice of

intrapersonal language; intrapersonal language stems from the socio-cultural learning theory as it is used in different contexts in order to assist in communication, which, in this case, assists Cooper in communicating with himself (Lantolf, 2000). By speaking his thoughts aloud, this allowed Cooper to comprehend his different ideas in more than one way through his cognitive and perceptual processing (Lupyan & Swingley, 2012). Cooper developed his writing skills as he used self-directed speech to decide what type of writing he was going to do. As Cooper wrote different letters, numbers and shapes on the whiteboard, he spoke aloud to himself during this process in order to assist his writing and decision making abilities. Evans (2009) suggested that it is not enough to write something, but by partaking in oral responses and discussions surrounding the topic, it provides more well-rounded understandings (as cited in Evans, 2012). Whether Cooper was taking on different roles during play, or was talking himself through different writing activities, this use of self-directed speech allowed him to listen to his thoughts aloud in order to communicate with himself and discuss his next steps for his play.

**Social interaction promotes development in Cooper's speaking and listening literacy skills as he creates imaginative play scenarios with peers through collaborative play.**

During play language is mainly used through social interaction. According to Owocki (2001), play “stimulates language innovation by introducing new words and concepts...motivates language use and practice, develops linguistic awareness, and expands content and concept knowledge” (as cited in Hatcher & Petty, 2004, p. 80). Through language use, both speaking and listening literacies develop greatly as collaborative play occurs. These literacies are supported by the development of two types of languages in individuals: intrapersonal and interpersonal language. Intrapersonal language is used for internal processing while interpersonal language is used during external human interaction (Lantolf, 2000). During the various imaginative play

scenarios Cooper created with his younger sister, he practices his speaking and listening literacy development as he interacted and communicated with her. As his sister is still an infant, she cannot yet use verbal language in her interactions, so Cooper would watch and listen to the gestures and noises she made in order to continue the play scenario. Vygotsky (1935) explained that a child's movements and gestures become symbolic functions during social interaction and ultimately convey meaning, even without oral languages being used (as cited in Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Cooper would use these gestures to create meaning and therefore initiate imaginative play with his sister, as well as use his own language to decide what to say and do next (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). This interaction in Cooper's play provided him with more opportunities to practice his language skills through both speaking and listening literacies. The more that Cooper interacted with himself or others, the more his literacy skills developed.

### **Implications**

**Experiences that children are exposed to play a significant role in their learning and should be monitored.** As Cooper illustrated his attentiveness to the language and actions he hears and sees around him, it is evident that the different events children are exposed to are crucial in their understanding of the world. Meltzoff and Moore (1994) explain that through adult observation, children learn from adult interactions, which impacts their overall development (as cited in Want & Harris, 2002). From this idea, it is important for teachers and parents to be aware of what they are exposing their children to in the likelihood that they imitate these actions.

In the classroom, teachers can ensure that all of the various activities, both learning and play, they provide for their students are beneficial to their learning. According to Neuman and Roskos (1990), teachers can benefit their students' literacy learning by providing literacy props that are authentic, functional, and appropriate (as cited in Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). Literacy

concepts can be easily promoted when teachers provide tools, such as blocks, books, and different paper materials, that are easily accessible for students to use in the classroom (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). The language that teachers use, both verbally and on paper, is also important to student learning as students may likely imitate what they hear and see in their own language. For instance, if teachers incorrectly use commas in their writing that they model punctuation for students, the students may then begin to use commas incorrectly. The same idea applies to verbal language, so if teachers use vocabulary in the correct context, then their students will use it correctly as well.

At home, parents can use this same idea and monitor what their children are being exposed to. In this type of environment, parents may have to monitor more resources that their children use, such as the internet, television and video games; these devices that their children watch and interact with will begin to appear in their own actions and language. Just as teachers provide literacy props for their students, parents can also engage their children in literacy-related activities by providing different props for them to use during play (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). In relation to language, parents also need to be aware of their own language they use around their children and be sure that it is used correctly. If parents were to use slang vocabulary words rather than the correct words or phrases, their children may pick up on this form of vocabulary and begin to use it incorrectly. According to Puckett and Diffily (2004), children form their understanding through their experiences, whether it's through their language or their actions, which emphasizes the importance of monitoring what children are experiencing in their environments (as cited in Hatcher & Petty, 2004).

**There should be an equal amount of time spent for children to partake in independent and collaborative play.** As Cooper benefited, and ultimately developed his

literacy skills, from both independent and collaborative play, it's important that children be exposed to both types of play. He benefited from play on his own by using self-directed speech in order to process and communicate his thoughts aloud and he benefited from play with others as he created imaginative play scenarios with Cecelia, which involved him verbally and physically interacting with her. Both types of play are forms of social interaction, for Diaz and Berk (2014) explain that self-directed speech, although done independently, is ultimately a social act as it is based off of previous interactions and conversations with others. Based on this idea, children gain social interaction benefits whether they play on their own or with others.

This implication can be provided by both teachers and parents, depending on the environment children are placed. For teachers in the classroom, they can provide students with independent and collaborative play and learning activities in order to allow their students to develop their speaking and listening literacy skills. Bodrova, Leong, and Paynter (1999) explain that teachers can still maintain a developmentally appropriate curriculum while implementing early childhood literacy standards (as cited in Hatcher & Petty, 2004). This allows teachers to have their students play and learn simultaneously at their appropriate level. This can be provided through the option of centers where students are given time to work and play on their own, with partners, small groups, or the whole class. Bredekamp and Copple (1997) discuss how, especially for primary students, it is important for teachers to plan their lessons and activities centered around play (as cited in Hatcher & Petty, 2004). As long as children are able to partake in play, then they are being given the opportunity to develop their different literacy skills in different ways through independent and social interaction. Whether students are working on academic or play activities, they are communicating within themselves or with others, which provides opportunities for them to speak, listen, and ultimately build these literacy skills.

In terms of the home environment, parents can provide their children opportunities to play on their own as well as with others present in their home. This can be done by the parents engaging and interacting with their children through the use of different materials or sources of entertainment. Parents can also allow their children the time and freedom to play on their own, as well as provide them their own space to do so such as their bedroom. Children are also given more opportunities to play collaboratively with others, and gain more social interaction, if there are siblings present at home. Depending on the age difference of the siblings, the play interactions can differ. Dyson (2003) explains that in their home environments, children have different cultures and communication practices that they acquire through their experiences at home with their families (as cited in Grugeon, 2005). Children can gain these experiences through their own inquiries, or through interaction with their parents or siblings. The ideas and materials that children interact with in their homes are then carried over and become part of their school interactions as well. Based on what children are exposed to at home, whether it is different media materials, images, songs, or characters, children develop their literacy skills as they interact with these ideas in home and at school (Grugeon, 2005).

### **Limitations**

There were various limitations based on the format of my research study. As my research study is in the form of a case study, and was very specific due to the home environment and single five-year-old child, the findings may have been much different if the study was conducted in a broader setting. For instance, if this study had been conducted in an environment with more children, such as a school or childcare facility, I may have gathered many more findings as there would have been a larger number of children, and therefore more interaction. Although my focal child had four other individuals to interact with, they were not as close in age as his peers in

school. His parents and me are at least twenty years older than him and his younger sister is four years younger than him. Although his sister is the closest in age to Cooper, she is still an infant, and therefore cannot yet talk and interact with him the way children in his preschool classroom can.

Another limitation in this study is its timing, including the season when it took place as well as its duration. Since this study was done during the winter months, it was cold and snowy outside and my focal child did not want to play outdoors due to these conditions. If this study was done during a warmer season, we may have been more likely to go outside and I could have observed how he played outdoors. For the duration of this study, it was conducted over the course of five weeks and the observations were done in half-hour increments. If this study had been done over a longer period of time, both in the number of weeks and length of observations, I would have spent more time with Cooper and ultimately concluded more in-depth findings pertaining to his play interactions.

### **Recommendations**

For future research on this topic of literacy development through play, one of the recommendations I would make is to conduct the study with at least two children of the same age. If the study is done in the home environment, then there should be at least two siblings close to the same age involved in the study. If the study is done outside of the home environment, such as a school classroom or daycare facility, then the same idea should apply. With more children involved, there will be many more opportunities for social interaction, which proved to be a main factor in literacy development. This may also allow for further findings based off of collaboration, communication and problem solving, as more children will provide more in-depth findings based off of social interaction.

Another recommendation I would make for future research is, as the researcher, to create play scenarios for the children. For my study, I let Cooper choose the play scenarios, both independently and collaboratively, for each observation. During my study, I had wondered what would be different about his interactions during play if I had created a game or scenario for us to play together. There may potentially be some differences with how children interact in play scenarios that are created for them versus play scenarios they create themselves. This would act as an intervention in the study in order to see how the types of play differed among the children and would ultimately create more findings in relation to literacy development.

### **Overall Significance**

This study is important for each of its two concepts: play and literacy development. In terms of play, it is not just one set form of activity; play is not just an activity for children, nor is it an activity that only happens at home nor an activity that only involves toys. In reality, anyone can partake in play activities, play can happen in any setting, and it can happen with or without the use of other objects. There are no set rules for what play is and what play is not; play is many things and ultimately there are many things that happen from play. One major effect of play is the development of literacy skills. Whether an individual is five or 25, the interactions involved in play require individuals to use their current literacy abilities of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in order to potentially expand upon them through different types of play activities. The way in which we learn to use these literacies comes from how we use them as we interact independently or with others as we play. This study shows the important role that play has in our world as play provides opportunities for children to apply the skills they have learned and build upon them as they enter a world, through play, that is entirely their own.

This study also illustrates the idea that literacy development does not only take place in a school environment, or with a teacher or just involving reading and writing activities.

Throughout this study, it is proven that literacy development can take place in the home environment and that a child can develop their literacy skills on their own, or through the interaction of others. It also discusses how literacy development is not just contained to skills in reading and writing, but through speaking and listening as well. As individuals strengthen their speaking and listening skills through play or other types of social interaction, their reading and writing skills ultimately develop as well, for all of these skills are united together as they all help to create language and interaction in our world.

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## Appendix A: Interviews

**Parent Interview 1 (Prior to Observations):**

*Pseudonym: Cooper*

1. Please tell me about how Cooper plays at home.
2. What would you say Cooper plays with most, and why?
3. What do you notice about his language as he plays?
4. How does his language differ and/or stay the same when he is not playing?
5. How does his interaction with technology look different and/or similar to his interaction with his other toys?

**Parent Interview 2 (After the Sixth Observation):**

*Pseudonym: Cooper*

1. I have noticed that Cooper uses very formal/mature language for someone at his age. What can you tell me about this? (When did he start using this language? How often does he use this language?)
  
2. I have noticed that Cooper will use language that is young for age. What can you tell me about this? (When did he start using this language? How often does he use this language?)
  
3. What have Cooper's preschool teachers shared with you about his behaviors/interactions in school, specifically when he plays?
  
4. I have noticed that Cooper uses a lot of things that he has experienced and mimics them through play. What kinds of things have you seen him mimic that he has seen/done in real life? Does he use these things or made-up scenarios more?
  
5. I have noticed that Cooper will stop his play to interact with Cecelia, or include her in his play somehow. What kinds of things do you usually see him doing with her?

**Focal Child Interview (Prior to Observations):**

*Pseudonyms: Cooper and Cecelia*

1. What is your favorite toy to play with? Why is it your favorite?
  
2. Would you rather play with toys, or play pretend games where you use your imagination?  
How come?
  
3. Would you rather play outside or inside? How come?
  
4. Would you rather play with your toys or play on the iPad? How come?
  
5. Do you like to play with other people or by yourself? How come?

Appendix B: Observations

**Double Entry Journal Form**

<b>Observations</b>	<b>Reflection/Interpretation</b>