

# Scaffolding and Encouraging Imaginary Play

by  
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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

As my 3-year-old daughter was lying on the couch watching television one snowy Monday afternoon, it dawned on me how much she does this. I approached her with a look of excitement and said, “Allie (all names used in this study are pseudonyms), let’s turn off the television and go play in the playroom.” Her response was, “No, I just want to relax.” She had been relaxing all morning long so this was not an acceptable answer for me. I then said in a calm manner, “Well you have relaxed all morning, it’s time we take a break from the television and play with some of our toys.” I wanted to think of a way to make Allie more motivated to play instead of always wanting to watch cartoons on television. I then thought of a different approach. “We can make a map to find the hidden treasure before the pirates do, but let’s remember all the wild animals that will try and stop us from getting that treasure!” Allie then looked at me and with a big smile on her face said, “Sure that sounds like fun! We aren’t afraid of animals, let’s do it!”

Her last response made me realize that I am not encouraging, supporting and promoting imagination within her daily activities as I should be and I need to find different ways to engage and keep her excitement going through play and imagination. What can I do to make it more meaningful and fun? I want to be that positive influence for my daughter. It has been stated that role playing with your child is common and as a result, is proven to have positive results (Diachenko, 2011).

Allie attends preschool two days a week, two and a half hours each time, at Hill Top Discovery Preschool. She is a very outgoing, bright little girl who enjoys socializing

and playing with her peers. Allie's teachers have nothing but wonderful things to say about her. Allie enjoys going to school and comes home with wonderful projects that she proudly displays on our refrigerator. I do wonder, however, if Allie is participating enough in imaginary play at school. Does Allie pretend play with her peers? Is she encouraged by her teachers, as well? When Allie does play at home, she always encourages me to sit down and play with her. I wanted to be involved in this important part in her life; however, I also wanted to expand on this and help further her thinking and encourage imaginary play and to be able to have her show me her thinking and use of imagination.

### **Significance of the Problem**

As a previous educator and presently a parent, I have noticed a significant increase in the advancement of technology. Throughout my teaching career, I have noticed that iPads, smart boards and digital animation have become more of an enjoyment and a learning experience for our youngest generation. However, it has steered this generation towards technologically-based entertainment, when I as an educator know the importance of play. Present day fascination with video games, television shows, movies and other technology-supported simulation has created a mindless activity with the only concentration being needed is with the click of fingers on the keyboard or pressure of fingers on the apps (Bergen, 2013; Agee & Welch, 2012).

As a teacher in the past, I have enjoyed promoting and encouraging imagination in my classroom. What I have noticed was that the students were looking for me to guide them on how to perform rather than them figuring out how to imagine on their own. I strongly believe in creative thinkers and the opportunity to think above and beyond what

is expected of us. Each person is different and unique and this should be shown in his or her work and performance. What I want for my daughter, Allie, is to be able to be independent and use her creativity and apply it to her thinking and imagination when playing. Research on play suggests that play is a very enjoyable and developmentally important part of childhood. It also allows for families to connect on a deeper level (Brown & Patte, 2012).

Imagination and play have a significant role in helping young children to become more confident and independent as they grow. Research continues to provide evidence on play not only being extremely important during a young child's development, but also in the future. It helps increase social skills, problem-solving skills, confidence and so much more (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). Imaginary play should be fun, encouraged, promoted and engaging. It should never be structured in such a way that children are not allowed to be creative thinkers. Children's natural way of thinking is by using their imagination in creative ways (Kudryavtsev, 2011).

It is my goal to be able to allow and encourage open-ended thinking in my home. Through implementing imaginary play, Allie had the opportunity to show me what she learned by reading books, playing with toys and even watching movies. So in this situation, I was her support system and allowed for her to be the creator in choosing how she would like to begin her imaginary play. I allowed Allie to make a decision on the steps she will take next and I follow her lead as to when she is ready to stop (Detour & Logue, 2011).

Being able to be a part of her play time, especially with imaginary play as well, is something I know will give her all the benefits she needs to become an independent individual.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to allow Allie the opportunity to explore and use imaginary play in as many ways possible. I can encourage and support this by allowing her to make decisions on what she would like to do. I asked the following question:

How can I encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play?

As a mother and educator, I know that it is important to have young children grow and develop in such a way where they are thinking openly and freely. Therefore, I conducted this study to further investigate and build my knowledge on the importance of play and imagination and ways in which I can encourage positive interactions between Allie and myself.

### **Study Approach**

The purpose of this study was to look at the different ways in which I can promote and encourage imaginary play with Allie. I conducted a self study on how I can support Allie in her thinking and help scaffold her ideas in imaginary play. For example, I assisted Allie in her imaginary play and thinking by picking up on an idea that she expressed to me. My qualitative self-study led me to research and study the ways in which I can help foster and further develop Allie's own imaginative thinking during play.

I implemented my prior knowledge on play by researching in depth on what imaginary play is, the importance of it and how it benefits young children and applied it to my six week study. In addition, I documented, collected and analyzed data by video taping my sessions with Allie.

Throughout my study, I documented my role as the facilitator. My goal at the end of this study was to look closely at my own interactions with Allie and the ways in which I helped facilitate her imaginary play. While playing with Allie, I used a variety of strategies during our interactions with one another. For example, while teaching Allie about problem-solving, we role played to mimic taking turns and engaging in positive interactions (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). I documented and collected data by video taping myself during play with Allie. I looked specifically at my body language, tone of voice, my reactions, as well as Allie's actions in response to me. Is she mimicking me? Is she taking the lead or am I leading her? All of these questions were important to review and reflect on to see what needs to be changed or modified for next time.

### **Rationale**

Children's sole responsibility when they are young is to play; however they want and whenever they want. It is the most important part of what they do while growing up. They acquire necessary skills during play that are self-taught and acceptable for their age. For example, children expressing their angers and frustrations during affective imagination (Diachenko, 2011) are simply developing the skills of self understanding and discovery (Canning, 2007). Imaginary play has endless opportunities for children to use their creativity however they would like. They are discovering what's in their world around them whether it's through fantasy or role play.

I conducted a self-study to look more closely at how I became more involved in play and helped support and encourage imaginary play that allowed Allie to have fun and think freely.

### **Summary**

I struggle with promoting and encouraging more imaginary play in my home, relying more on board games and reading books. This self-study helped me to look at ways in which I can continue to encourage and engage Allie's thinking by assisting and allowing her to use her imagination and creativity during play.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

My research question is:

How can I encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play?

In order to contextualize my research, I have reviewed and synthesized literature related to benefits of imaginary play, children's choice in imaginary play, supporting imaginary play, and book-related dramatic play. At the end of each section, the significance of the literature that was reviewed will be discussed.

### **Defining Imaginary Play**

Imagination is an understanding of our world, allowing children to mentally experience the real world, investigate concepts, and learn about how to build relationships with others (Agee & Welch, 2012). Imaginary play begins "as a child moves from infancy to preschool" (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 50). Children begin to observe other people using objects during social interactions. For example, two children observe a mother feeding and rocking her baby. The two observers may begin to mimic these actions by grabbing a doll and pretending to bottle feed it. Older children may add more detailed actions such as calling themselves mommy and using mommy like behaviors such as using baby talk when holding the doll (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

Make-believe play develops in five stages. During the earliest stage, object-orientated play, a child may simply make the "vroom-vroom" sound when playing with a toy car. The second stage involves children using roles within action. A child may walk around in high heels and when asked what she is doing, she responds with, "I am a mommy." The third stage becomes a more mature form of play. This is when children begin assigning roles to other children and make sure the roles relate with what they are

acting out. An example may be when two children are play doctor; one will take on the role of patient while the other plays the doctor. Stage four of make-believe play consists of multiple play actions and scenarios where children are consistent with their roles that they are playing while performing difficult scenarios. The fifth and final stage of make-believe play takes more time to develop than the other four because children both plan and discuss their pretend actions. They may be playing multiple roles, sometimes without having a physical partner, rather, using stuffed animals or imaginary partners instead (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Every stage in imaginary play is “essential for young children’s learning and development” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 53).

### **Benefits of Imaginary Play**

Imaginary play opens up a window of opportunities for children everywhere. It is the freedom and joyfulness (Gmitrova, 2013) that enables children to interact with their world around them (Yelland, 2011). Imagination enables children the opportunity to view a variety of events or situations from diverse perspectives and to explore what can happen in different scenarios with alternative outcomes. Imaginary play is an important part in a young child’s development (Kudryavtsev, 2011). It has many cognitive benefits that enable children to problem solve and reproduce already viewed actions and scenarios (Diachenko, 2011). By experiencing and applying both positive and negative emotions during play, children benefit and mature emotionally (Dillon & Russ, 2011). Finally, imaginary play offers children social development opportunities where they learn how to develop relationships, settle conflict and take turns (Canning, 2007). All of these benefits provide a critical component for learning and growing.

## **Cognitive Development**

According to Canning (2007), play is a personal journey which consists of discovery, experimentation, knowledge and empowerment. Children are naturally curious. They ask questions and closely observe the world around them. These are essential components of cognitive development.

Children's cognitive development in imaginary play consists of continued practice and expanding big ideas, concepts and skills. They gain the ability to think creatively and imaginatively (Yelland, 2011). This connects with Diachenko's (2011) idea of creativity. He found that there are two main stages of preschoolers' imaginative function: the construction of an idea about a creative product and the design of a plan for realizing this thought. According to Dillon and Russ (2011), "divergent thinking is a cognitive process" (p. 330) which supports imaginary play by allowing children to develop and create multiple stories and manipulate them into different meanings and representations. They are playing with "different ideas in their imagination and recombining images and ideas into new configurations" (Dillon & Russ, 2011, p. 331).

Problem solving and language use are other cognitive skills that have significant impact on academic readiness and school success (Gmitrova, 2012). Through problem solving, children develop these skills through creatively exploring and observing the social world around them. This allows children the cognitive ability to resolve social issues independently. An example of this through play would be children negotiating and agreeing to take turns pretending to be the truck driver if there is only one truck available to drive (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). This teaches children not to argue about a situation, moreover they learn to make decisions and resolve social problems. In other scenarios,

children also observe and watch a play situation evolve and then assess the situation before inviting themselves into the play space, evaluating how 'safe' they feel (p. 234) and how much they would like to become involved with others (Canning, 2007).

Crowley, Howard, Miles & McInnes (2013) believe that language effectively facilitates open-ended questioning techniques. Children are exposed to a variety of languages, both through school and home. School talk is different than when a child is speaking at home, which, according to Crowley, Howard, McInnes and Miles (2013), brings in "more opportunities for learning" (p. 272) because it allows for play activities to be left to children and gives parents the opportunity to ask open ended questions. Social situations and behaviors dictate language usage. For example, children learn that one should use polite language when engaging in the role of sales person (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Children are able to voice their opinions and assert control through the language that they use alone or with others. They can communicate during play with others by investigating, solving problems, expressing their fears or reliving anxious experiences within a controlled and safe environment (Yelland, 2011).

Imitation also allows for children to continue creating pretend acts without relying on assistance from others (Christie & Nielsen, 2008). According to Kudryavtsev (2011), "Childhood is almost the only part of a person's life where creative work is a universal and natural way of existence and where mastering an elementary way of handling a cultural object occurs in the child as a discovery for oneself" (p. 46). Adults cannot think for children. They are merely there to help encourage imaginary play and are to enjoy discovering and learning about all the new creations children are able to achieve. According to Dillon and Russ (2011), creating pretend acts aids problem solving and

divergent thinking. Children who have the opportunity to be involved in imaginary play with organized make-believe stories that involve expressive emotions, have more original responses when taking a divergent test (Dillon & Russ, 2011).

### **Emotional and Social Development**

During imaginary play, there are different emotions that children naturally encounter. They can be feelings of frustration, sadness, sympathy, confusion and pleasure. Children learn about their own actions and emotions by using them on demand. For example, a child says during pretend play, “I am really OK, but I just got a shot at the doctor’s office and I am playing a baby so I should cry” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 51). It’s important for children to demonstrate different emotions during imaginary play because it helps them to understand their feelings and to develop emotional self control (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). During pretend play, the emotions children produce are intertwined by three common themes: “the need for protection; the need for power over things; and the need to attack and destroy” (Liu, 2008, p. 32). All of these emotions, according to Dillon & Russ (2011), are called affective imagination.

Diachenko (2011) describes affective imagination as “imagination and creative work where expressions of unconscious conflicts relate to the development of inborn tendencies” (p. 20). Through affective imagination, children naturally express more positive emotion, such as happiness and affection, during play. Other children naturally display emotions of anger, sadness or fear. (Dillon & Russ, 2011; Diachenko, 2011) For example, recreating the actions of the big bad wolf from Little Red Riding Hood or escaping the horrible witch that captured the brother and sister from Hansel and Gretel provide children with the ability to display and rely on emotions during play. Canning

(2007) thinks that the feelings of anger and frustration enable children to develop skills of self understanding and discovery. They are learning about who they are and who they want to be. According to Diachenko (2011) role play, especially in the child's home, is expressively associated with affective imagination because it allows children to resolve their emotions. For example, when asked about their three-year old child's fears, parents replied by saying that she is very brave and outgoing and scared of almost nothing. She enjoys being involved in plays with wolves and witches. This type of affective imagination is the "protection of personality and the protection of the ego from negative experiences. This child acted out her fears and found ways to solve conflicts in play" (Diachenko, 2011, p. 21).

Character play is another important role of emotional play. It develops after children have had enough exposure with pretend actions and objects to engage in pretend play (Berenst, Deunk & Glopper, 2008). Liu (2008) states from her research that this is part of children's projection of their "inner and emotional life" (p. 32), their ego development. There are three commonalities that are seen in children's emotional realities and responses: their desire and need for personal protection, the need for power over things while playing and the urge to attack and destroy. Therefore, children learn and practice engaging in different roles and thus experience the outcome of different scenes and scenarios (Berenst, Deunk & Glopper, 2008). Children make their own decisions about constructing identities and deciding on what they can say and do when role playing with one another. By actively engaging in positive social situations, children begin to develop a strong understanding of social practices, including how to resolve conflict with their peers.

Imaginary play allows for children to have the opportunity to become more socially active with one another. According to Lui (2008), they develop skills by learning how to share, being cooperative with one another, reciprocating, interacting, compromising and maintaining positive peer relationships and friendships. In these situations, there is never a need for adult interference. Children are simply learning how to engage and interact with one another without any help from an adult. According to Agee & Welch (2012), “Children use their imagination to try distinct scenarios and a variety of ways to respond to, and deal with, other children and adults; learning to take turns; and negotiating conflicts (p. 73). All of these responses allow children to learn and have an opportunity to explore their feelings and impulses and to come to terms with positive situations and situations where there is more of a disagreement (Liu, 2008). In positive situations, children work together to create a pretend scenario and learn how to solve disagreements by talking and negotiating. An example of this might be several children agreeing to play hospital. One child facilitates by stating she will be the doctor first and the other child will be the doctor next. Both agree and start their pretend play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). In other situations, a group of children cannot agree on who will be the waitress and who will be the customer. They never come to an agreement and part ways, playing independently instead. These are examples of children finding their own voices and learning how to compromise with one another (Canning, 2007).

Social skills are such an important part in a child’s development. These skills give children the ability to grow and develop into their unique selves, increase their personal and social awareness within old and new relationships and, most importantly, give them the power to develop as individuals (Canning, 2007). As they grow and mature, children

continue to learn about the world around them and understand how to interact with one another. They learn how to communicate effectively through their peers', siblings' and parents' examples. Adults can become positive role models by consistently facilitating small discussions and demonstrating for children how to show respect by listening and responding during conversations. Adults can help scaffold and assist children in engaging in "role speech" by using "vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation" (Bodrova & Leong, 2012, p. 33). Adults can introduce children to the ways that people of different occupations communicate with one another. For example, a 911 operator will assure a helpless person on the phone by calmly stating, "help is on the way" (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Social skills are explored and learned through play in a variety of ways which makes development fun and engaging for children.

### **Children's Choice in Imaginary Play**

Children are the ones who, during imaginary play, have all of the authority. They have the ultimate control and freedom to determine their own actions and behaviors within a situation (Canning, 2007). To elaborate more, Canning believes that children have inherent characteristics of the ability to direct their own and other children's scenarios during play, the freedom to determine their own actions, the choice to be independent from others around them, and the flexibility within their own play environment. Children, during imaginary play, have the choice to decide roles, choose any type of prop, play as long as they would like, and apply specific scenario and languages when appropriate.

“PRoPELS is an acronym that stands for the most important elements of children’s imaginary play. It is on the continuum from most immature to most mature”

(Bodrova & Leong, 2012, p. 29). PRoPELS is broken down in the following ways:

**Plan-** Children’s ability to think about play before it begins

**Roles** Children Play- includes the language, actions and emotional expression that associate with a specific role

**Props-** the objects, including real, symbolic, and imaginary, children use during play.

**Extended** time frame- play that lasts for a long stretch of time; within one play session for an hour or more or extending over several sessions lasting several days.

**Language-** what children say to start a scenario, coordinate actions with others and associating speech within a particular role.

**Scenario-**what children act out, including the sequence of a script and interactions within roles.

All six elements that are essential in children’s choice during play are incorporated throughout the three subtopics that I will discuss below.

## **Interaction**

Children interact with one another in a variety of different ways. **Roles** children assume during play are one mature form of interaction with one another. They choose whom they want to play with and what roles they would like to take on. Then, as a group, children select a **scenario**. This requires listening skills from everyone. They each have to agree and choose how they would like to set up their play together. During this third stage of make-believe play, children begin to coordinate their roles with one another,

making sure their pretend actions align with what was chosen from their partners. It is very common to hear children directing one another if they aren't happy with the outcome of the role play. For example, children might comment if the customer is paying for the groceries at the checkout line when instead, they are supposed to be the ones playing the role of cashier (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). If a child does not want to partake in role playing, it is her choice to play with someone else of interest.

**Language** is another way children have choice during play. Children use language to choose who they would like to interact with during play and learn how to communicate with one another. Some children may express their feelings to others by saying, "thank you" and "please." Others may express their feelings in a negative way by saying, "it's mine!" The ability to choose and use of language provides children with a sense of empowerment, helping them to better understand themselves. They will choose who they listen to, when and how to follow directions, and they will respond when they feel it is appropriate. "Children have the ultimate control and freedom to determine their own actions and behaviour of the situation" (Canning, 2007, p. 229).

### **Decision Making**

Decision making is an everyday occurrence. Some decisions will be simple while others will take a lot more time to assess. From a child's point of view, **planning** play before the play actually occurs (Bodrova & Leong, 2012) may be time consuming. However making simple decisions, will allow children to have an opportunity to understand who they are as a person (Canning, 2007). Canning (2012) also believes that children determine their own actions and behavior within a situation. They have the freedom to make decisions about the type of play they engage in and the social

connections they make such as directing their own actions as well as other children's play situations. Having an **extended** time frame may help children simply make the decision of how long their play will last. It can be one long stretch of time or it can be several short sessions, lasting multiple days (Bodrova & Leong, 2012).

The type of decisions children make is up to them. Complex decisions often involve multiple steps or approaches during play. A complex decision could be a time when a child is pretending to drive a car and needs to think about what the car does; what the driver of the car needs to do; and where she may want to go while driving. Children are the conductor in this situation, learning new and critical skills for improvement in imaginary play (Agee & Welch, 2012). A more simple decision is, according to Canning (2012), what the child likes and dislikes, who they want to share their play space with and who they do not.

### **Use of Props**

**Props** are the main objects that children use during imaginary play. Props allow children to explore and make discoveries (Yelland, 2011), which then allows them the opportunity to choose the props in a variety of different ways. Some of the props that children choose to use are dolls that they can dress up, feed, take on a walk and put to bed. A designated area where children have the option of dressing as a character and role playing is also considered a prop for imaginary play. Other props that children have the ability to choose are the creation of an image of something they want to construct by "putting together different impressions they have of reality and turning it into a concrete whole. An example of this would be converting a simple square into a house, or a TV-set, or a dog kennel and so on" (Diachenko, 2011, p. 22). Symbolic representation allows for

more advanced thinking and ultimately leads to children using props more effectively. For example “children may use a pencil to represent a spoon while stirring soup for a family dinner” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 32) Giving children more open-ended props such as different colored or textured fabric instead of the usual blue Cinderella dress or skull and crossbones pirate hat, allows for them to choose and create or shape their own unique characters, thus exceeding the expectations of traditional characters (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

### **Supporting Imaginary Play**

Teachers and adults are who children look up to the most. We are the ones they turn to for help, advice and support. The role of the teacher and parent is essential for enabling cognitive, emotional and social development in young children. Crowley, Howard, McInnes & Miles (2012) also believe that adult-child interactions need to be developed in order to maximize playfulness and enhance learning. During imaginary play, both teachers and parents can help scaffold and facilitate through questioning, encouraging, modeling and creating a supportive environment.

### **Questioning**

According to Yelland (2011), her research suggests probing children’s thinking with questions helps to extend their learning. It allows for children to think and also gives them the chance to view play in multiple ways. Adult initiation of play builds a foundation for children’s independent creation of play in the future. Children will be able to explore their play on their own which will enable them to build a sense of self empowerment. Agee & Welch (2012) suggest using questioning techniques to help spark curiosity and encourage discussions in such a way that engages in narrative structure by

“guiding the direction the story will take: “What happened next?” and “What did he look like/do/say/think?” (p. 74).

Another technique is for adults to play games that provoke thought. Incorporating imagery or real problems helps children to creatively problem solve when asked questions such as, “What could we do?” (p. 74). Encouraging students to create silly uses for everyday objects is yet another technique to help promote independence with imaginary play. One example could be using “peanut butter as glue” (p. 74). “Another game that helps to create images for children is playing “What animal is this?” where the adult starts describing one aspect of the animal at a time until the children being guessing” (p. 74). Other simple questioning techniques that help children make decisions about role play include asking children what they would like to play or what they want to be. Moving on to more specific details such as what props they might need continues to develop their independency with imaginary play (Bodrova & Leong, 2012).

### **Encouraging**

Teachers and adults can think of a variety of ways to help encourage imagination. It is always helpful to keep encouraging, reassuring and praising children (Yelland, 2011) as they continue to learn about imaginary play. Because they continue to develop their social and language skills and also learn to regulate and control their “physical and cognitive behavior” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 50), it is imperative for educators to foster and encourage opportunity for imaginary play. According to Agee & Welch (2012), important ways for teachers and adults to continue to be supportive in imaginary play include

Encouraging children by creating their own images and stories,

Reading about new places and experiences,  
Help children to explore all five senses in order to create an interactive story,  
Help children explore different designs by looking at magazines or what is simply around them  
Ask children what it looks like to them,  
Invite children to represent their imaginary worlds through a variety of different objects such as, plastic containers, boxes, dress-up clothes; play dough,  
Use blocks or furniture as imaginary trains, busses, restaurants and stores (p, 75).

Teachers and parents should always continue to encourage the child to use both “gestures and words” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 53) to describe how they are using their object in an imaginary way because it continues to promote children’s imagination and further develops their thinking while playing

### **Modeling**

Adults working alongside children and being able to model skills can help with further investigation and questioning (Yelland, 2011). According to Bodrova & Leong (2012) “many of the play skills that children learned in the past by observing and imitating their older playmates now have to be taught directly by teachers or learned from behaviors that teachers model” (p. 31). With the help of directing the play for younger children, especially those who are just beginning to pretend, educators and parents can become positive models and increase production of pretend acts (Christie & Neilsen, 2007). Christie & Neilsen’s (2008) research indicates that, “children were engaged in more pretend play after watching an adult model demonstrate acts of pretence than before observing the model” (p. 156). There are a many different ways that teachers and adults can continue to help model behavior and imaginary play.

One way to model during imaginary play is by showing how to use different props in a symbolic way, slowly expanding the ideas for different uses of the same object (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Many children use the materials given to them without knowing that there is more than one way that they can play with them. Having someone model this opens up more opportunities for children, allowing them to continue using their imagination freely. An example of using a prop in multiple ways would be using a big toy dog as the Big Bad Wolf when children play fairy tales, and later using the same dog as a Dalmatian in a fire station (Bodrova & Leong, 2012).

Another way to help foster independent imaginary play is to model pretend actions or role play (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Children see this as an opportunity to connect examples that they have seen from adults to their own lives and it also helps them make sense of situations more precisely, especially if initiated through interactions with other adults (Canning, 2007). One example of this is when going out to dinner, children notice that they are the customers who order and the waiters and waitresses are the ones who serve them. They then can use this knowledge at home or school to act out and role play with one another.

### **Supportive Environment**

Because imagination is the “engine that will drive their success in school and adult life” (Agee & Welch, 2013, p. 76), it also helps with the development of children’s language, literacy and social skills. When children play, they should have a variety of materials and resources that are accessible. They can be displayed in many different places for children to observe and decide on what to play with. They can explore the different resources that are provided for them, learning how to use the materials in

multiple ways. Lastly, with the materials provided, children can create a unique imagination independently, with adults or with peers.

Different materials and resources provide an engaging opportunity for play. Adults have the opportunity to bring novelty, creativity and significance into any situation (Kudryavtsev, 2011). Such resources and materials, according to Yelland (2011), include but are not limited to, “puzzles, construction blocks (Duplo/Lego), centres (e.g. dress up, home corner) and enough space within the daily schedule so children can choose between the various ‘play’ options” (p. 5). These sufficient materials and equipment, give children the opportunity to expand their play, which creates a positive relationship among children (Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

Other objects within the environment should be easily accessible and used in multiple ways, such as using paper to create a paper airplane, a cardboard box as a castle and fabric scrapes to create a princess dress (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Encouraging children to use a variety of different resources allows them to learn more about themselves through their own ways of thinking and use of creativity. The environment should be unstructured, child-directed and provide open-ended material that offers multiple, creative play opportunities (Agee & Welch, 2012; Yelland, 2011; Canning, 2007).

Adults can also provide a supportive environment during play and still keep it child-initiated by giving children multiple open-ended props by asking, for example, what they can use a string of yarn for. Another way that adults can create a supportive environment is by helping to plan future play. Children can draw out their topics and ideas beforehand and then review and discuss subsequent next steps. According to

Bodrova & Leong (2003), children tend to stay longer with their chosen theme and are less distracted by other activities going on around them.

### **Book-Related Dramatic Play**

Books provide many opportunities for all readers. They allow a temporary escape into a world beyond their own. Books also give younger readers a starting point to help with creating ideas for imaginary play. Book-to-play connections, according to Rowe (2007) involve:

- Connecting books to the world of objects by locating and holding book-related toys and props
- Personal response to books through dramatic enactments of feelings and actions
- Participating in book-reading events through the persona of a pretend character
- Reenactments of book events
- Sorting out authors meaning through play, and
- Using book themes and characters as springboards for personal inquiries about the world (p. 43).

Picture books are a very engaging way to involve children in critical thinking, role playing and language building. They provide opportunities that aid in reading and enable children to participate in conversations. Using different versions of the same book with a few discrepancies of the text or illustrations will allow children to become more creativity with the props and roles when acting out a scene from the story (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

### **Benefits of Literacy in Play**

Rowe (2006) states that, “Play allows children to enter the world of books through language, movement, and the sensory cues provided by props, costumes and sets” (p. 49). Allowing children to have exposure with both print and multimodal texts has many

positive benefits. Family members who incorporate play and literacy such as, “reading stories, using puppets to retell stories, dramatizing stories, and interacting about stories” (Saracho & Spodek, 2006, p. 718) can help further develop children’s literacy skills. Saracho & Spodek (2006) also note that by being actively involved in children’s imaginary play, adults are able to guide children’s attention and knowledge by interacting and modeling for them. This then allows children to use the information and events from a book and invent and replay scenes (Rowe, 2007).

Language development, comprehension and personal connections are another important benefit of book-related play. Play allows children to respond to stories by combining both actions and language (Rowe, 2007). Children who engage in pretend play are able to elaborate more on their story telling and also have higher levels of descriptive structures in their language than children who do not engage in pretend play (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Rowe (2007) mentions that “dramatic story reenactments provide opportunities for mental reconstructions of story events and the development of story schemas” (p. 39). As they continue to become experts in imaginary play and within the social nature, children then have the ability to enhance their “reading skills and comprehension” (Rowe, 2007, p.39). They then can reflect on what they have done and may modify or change to better fit their understanding between literacy and play. Children are always curious and ask many questions and make connections during reading. Book-related play supports and provides opportunities to help further explore questions in connection with their every day experiences. As reading occurs with the support from an adult, children are able to comment on the illustrations, ask questions, make predictions and share personal connections (Rowe, 2007).

## Picture Books

Research has shown, according to Bodrova & Leong (2003) that, “children’s engagement in pretend play was found to be positively and significantly correlated with such competencies as text comprehension and metalinguistic awareness and with a more clearer understanding of the purpose of reading and writing” (p. 50). Rowe posits that the discussion about play and role play among children naturally requires them to use books as necessary objects which aid independent learning (2007).

Picture books are engaging books for children because they “excite visual senses, play with language and form, and engage readers of all ages” (Napoli, 2010, p. 82). Picture books help to encourage critical thinking, conversations and dialogue (Napoli, 2010). They also allow for readers to go beyond just reading the text. Picture books give readers opportunity to create their own interpretations and story (Napoli, 2010).

One such genre of picture book that allows for manipulation of the text in imaginative play is the postmodern picture book. Postmodern picture books have characteristics such as a sarcastic or self-mocking tone and self-referential text. These books allow children to become active agents in the story rather than just passive listeners of someone else’s story (Napoli, 2010). Napoli (2010) has listed a variety of postmodern picture books that allow for discussions, creativity and imagination such as, *The Book That Eats People* by John Perry (2009), *Chicken and Cat Clean Up* by Sara Varon (2009) and *A Book* by Mordicai Gerstein (2002). Rowe (2007) mentions that story reenactments allow for mental rebuilding of the story events and representation which increase the child’s reading comprehension skills. Therefore, the social nature of play has a significant impact on reading skills and comprehension, Through “metafictive, visual and narrative

components” (Napoli, 2010, p. 82), these books encourage critical thinking, conversation and dialogue allowing readers to become part of the story.

## **Engagement**

There are endless opportunities for children to become actively involved with books during play. According to Rowe (2007), children can be engaged in books by being “emotionally involved, emphasizing or identifying with the text” (p. 57). They can become the character in the story. For example, when reading *The Three Little Pigs*, the child is role playing as the big bad wolf. The child becomes angry and frustrated because he cannot blow down the house. That child is now emotionally involved in the story. This child is also identifying with the text because he or she is associating his or her emotions with what is currently happening in the scene of the story.

Another way to incorporate books to help support imaginary play that Rowe (2007) mentions is book-dramatic play, which includes “talk, gesture, prop selection, costuming and set design within the same event” (p. 53). This is one way that children are able to make meaning of a story. Even though children possess the innate ability to make meaning from a story, they can also engage themselves through props, role play, discussions, and questioning. Using different books or even different versions of the same book will allow children to become more creative in deciding roles and props when acting out the story (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). They are able to see the story from different perspectives, allowing them to develop their own ways of thinking and knowing that there is never just one way of creating something. It is through engagement during book-related play that children are able to apply their curiosity to help make sense of the world around them.

## **Conclusion**

My review of the literature has revealed that imaginary play allows children to investigate, socialize and most importantly, learn about themselves. There are many cognitive, emotional and social benefits to imaginary play that prepare them for the real world and for the future because they will have the skills necessary to solve problems and communicate with one another. In addition, children have the choice to choose who they would like to interact with, make simple and complex decisions during imaginary play and what types of props they will use. During this time, adults can help support imaginary play by asking questions, showing encouragement and reassurance, modeling how to use a prop in more than one way and also providing a quality learning environment. By incorporating book-related play, children have the opportunity to push their creativity to another level.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

As both a mother and an educator, I am constantly analyzing myself in making sure I do what is best for my children. Technology has increased dramatically over the past few decades and is now leaving children with limited opportunities to use their imagination during play. I find my daughter, Allie, more interested in television than her toys and her use of imagination this has become a big concern.

The main objective of this qualitative self-study, as stated in Chapter 1, was to examine the ways in which I can encourage and support Allie's continued exploration with imaginary play. My self-study allowed me to gain more insight into the following question:

How can I encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play?

### **Context of the Study**

#### **Home & Playroom**

This study was conducted in my home, specifically located in Allie's playroom. Allie lives in a quiet neighborhood located in Upstate New York where she has started to create many unforgettable memories. As Allie continues to grow and develop rapidly before my eyes, I will continue to support and encourage her everyday curiosity about life that surrounds her.

Our day begins with breakfast. Allie usually requests that I turn on the television so that she can watch while she eats. Once breakfast has ended, we continue into the playroom where she free plays with whatever is available to her. She usually plays with the drum set, builds blocks and skims one or two Dr. Seuss books. After her usual

routine, she quickly gets bored and stops playing and proceeds to the television. From there, I make her favorite lunch, often macaroni and cheese, and then we continue upstairs to get ready for nap time. After nap, Allie always asks to watch a show and eat snack. I allow this so that she has the ability to wake up and quietly eat her snack. After one show, we go into the playroom where we play until her father comes home. After dinner, Allie plays with all of us in the playroom, and before bed, she likes to occupy herself with a quick game on the iPad. This is an example of a typical day with Allie that led to my study.

I conducted this study in my home, specifically in the playroom. The playroom is set up in a way that I think would be appealing to a typical 3 year old. One wall consists of a chalkboard where Allie is able to play school and use her imagination in many ways. Another wall is Allie's reading center where there are two rows of books that she can choose from. They are easily accessible and located within her reach. There are play clothes hanging up along with a mirror where Allie can play dress up and see herself. Along with play clothes, there is a kitchen set, train table, shelves that are organized and labeled so that Allie knows where her toys are located without having to ask me for assistance. The environment to which children are exposed significantly affects their development (Gharahbeiglu, 2007).

### **Imaginary Play**

Since my study was focused on imaginary play, it is important for me to explain Allie's level of imaginary play during the study. Allie demonstrated basic understanding of imaginary play. One example is that Allie liked to take her shopping cart and pretend she was going to the grocery store to buy milk and bread. She came back, gave it to me,

and asked if I needed her to go back and buy anything else. Another example of imaginary play is using her blocks to build a castle. She told me who lives in the castle and who doesn't.

As shown, Allie clearly understands how to use her imagination during play, but the main focus of my self-study was to encourage her imagination and to help scaffold her ideas more, which promoted a deeper level of learning. What Allie needed was additional scaffolding to expand her imagination during play, for example, modeling the appropriate language usage and role playing during a trip to the zoo (Leong & Bodrova, 2012) will help her to learn and understand more information about people and places.

### **Participant and Positionality**

Since the purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which I can help to further support imaginary play for my daughter, Allie, and I had chosen to conduct a self-study, I chose myself as the sole participant. Since I was the one facilitating and reflecting on my perceptions of a child's understanding and engagement in imaginary play, I had the opportunity to reflect on my own practices and beliefs. The findings of my study allowed me to gain more insight about my role in supporting Allie's imaginary play.

I am a Caucasian female in my thirties. I was educated in a small suburban district in a mid-size city in Western New York, where the majority of my peers were from white middle class families. After graduating high school, I continued my education at Monroe Community College and thereafter, at The College at Brockport, State University of New York, where I earned my Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education for grades one through six in 2007. I just received my Certification in Special Education grades one

through six of this year. Currently, I am working toward my Master's degree of Science in Education at the State University of New York at Brockport.

After graduating from college in 2007, I began my teaching career in a small suburban district which serves mostly middle to upper-class families in Frederick, Maryland. I taught 5<sup>th</sup> grade until 2009, until my husband and I moved back to Upstate New York because of a job opportunity. From there, I stayed home raising my two children. I have a boy named Carter who is two years old and my 3 year old daughter, Allie. I am currently a substitute teacher in multiple districts working with students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade.

As children grow and develop, their dramatic play changes and the way in which it links to other areas of development is imperative to children's assimilation to reality (Rowe, 2007). That is why it was important that I further investigate my positionality as a parent, educator and researcher prior to this study so that I was able to positively reflect on my research experience.

Throughout my education and teaching career, I have established my own philosophy of education that allows children to be anyone they want to be, establish confidence and most importantly, have a love for learning.

First and foremost, I believe that every child has his or her own way of expressing him or herself. Whether it's artistically through singing, dancing, reading, and writing, children have the ability to think and act as freely as they would like. There is never a right or wrong way of doing something. As Canning (2007) wrote, "play is a personal journey of discovery, experimentation, experience, learning and empowerment" (p. 233).

Secondly, it is my belief that allowing children be able to be creative builds confidence within their work and can demonstrate and show others who they are as a person. I believe that all teachers should encourage and promote students to be “curious, creative and inquisitive” (Yelland, 2011, p. 4). By being curious, children look at all different aspects of play, asking themselves a variety of questions in order to find the answer. By being creative, children have the ability to make new things or think of new ideas. Lastly, by having children be inquisitive, they have the desire to learn more, and ask several questions until they have reached an understanding.

Finally, I believe that all children should have fun and enjoy learning. Children are still children and not only do they need to know and understand that learning is important, they also need to know that it can be fun, as well. Bodrova & Leong state that, play does not take away from learning, but instead contributes to it (2003). Playing with a variety of different toys, for example, a kitchen set with cooking utensils, can help children have a better understanding about what it means to cook. Supporting young children during play is important as they continue to learn and develop (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

### **Procedures**

The data collection for this study occurred over a period of six weeks. The following is the sequence in which data collection was done:

#### **Week 1:**

- Created an initial video recording of myself playing with Allie that determined a baseline of my actions and reactions.

- Began picture book related play with Allie-providing props, role play and ensuring an environment conducive to our specific picture book.
- Began video-taping our play together looking for specific trends, themes or patterns
- Began writing daily research journal entries
- Began weekly analysis of my body language, tone of voice, conversations, environment supporting imaginary play and reactions during play, Allie's reactions and the research journal data.

**Week 2-5:**

- Continued with a picture book related play with Allie-providing props, role play and ensuring an environment conducive to our specific picture book.
- Continued video-taping our play together looking for specific trends, themes or patterns
- Continued writing daily research journal entries
- Continued weekly analysis of my body language, tone of voice, conversations and reactions during play, Allie's reactions and the research journal data.

**Week 6:**

- Concluded analysis of my body language, tone of voice, conversations and reactions during play, Allie's reactions and reviewing the research journal data.
- Reviewed initial video and reflection to determine my progress and growth in aiding Allie's imagination during play.

## **Data Collection**

The purpose of this study was to examine how I can encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play. I collected data through the use of videotaping, research journal entries and reflection on my interaction and response to Allie during her imaginary play.

### **Videotaping Play Episodes**

My first source of data was to videotape my imaginary play with Allie. Each day, for six weeks I videotaped myself playing with Allie in both her playroom upstairs and downstairs. Occasionally we would engage in imaginary play in her bedroom. Anywhere Allie chose to imagine, I would make sure to follow along and videotape our sessions.

At the end of each day, I reviewed the videotape and reflected upon my actions, language and body language with Allie. This helped me to change or modify the next day's activity with Allie. I also reviewed Allie's responses during imaginary play, specifically looking for commonalities such as mimicking my actions, viewing my tone of voice, body language and using this as a support for her imagination during play. I worked and recorded my sessions with Allie for roughly 30 minutes, approximately 3 days a week.

### **Research Journal**

The second data collection method that I used was writing reflections in a research journal. After recording each play session with Allie, I viewed the video and reflected on my role throughout each session. This guided my decisions concerning how I

participated in Allie's play for the next session. I completed these journal entries at the end of each day and focused on the following questions:

- How was my body language?
  - Was it influencing Allie's play?
  - Was I physically active enough?
- How was my word choice and inflection?
  - Was it influencing Allie's play?
  - Did I act interested and involved?
  - What can I do differently next time?
- Based on today's imaginary play with Allie, what did I do to help encourage and support her?
- What can I do next time to better promote imaginary play?

Each journal entry helped guide and lead me to the next day's activity. It served as a support system that helped me make adjustments and improvements when necessary.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Video-Taping**

Three days per week, I videotaped my imaginary play sessions with Allie. I analyzed my own and Allie's body language, reactions and tone of voice through a coding process. The coding process led me to determine the common themes that emerged. Taking information from my collections and then comparing it to the emerging categories (Samaras, 2011) gave me a better understanding of how my encouragement and support impacted Allie.

## **Research Journal**

I wrote daily reflections in my journal after every session with Allie. I wrote about what went well, what did not go so well and what changes I needed to make for the next day. I used my questions as a guide to help me gain a better understanding of the data and noticed any patterns that began to emerge. I used two different colored highlighters, green and red. The green was for what went well that day and the red indicated what I did not do so well during play. I also highlighted the specifics of what I had done with Allie for the day. Some examples of my daily reflective writing are, “We moved around a lot during our ocean scavenger hunt”, “My tone of voice really helped Allie be more imaginative” and “My surprised reaction led Allie to change from surprised to curious.”

I then compared my analysis of both the journal reflections and the video tapes as a guide to help me develop a better understanding of the data. After reading my journal reflections, I then studied the video to visually assess the specifics of where I had, for example, my ‘surprised’ reaction, or if my body language was positively influencing Allie’s reactions toward our play scenarios. Comparing the analysis provided me with adequate information to modify my interactions with Allie.

## **Criteria for Trustworthiness**

As a teacher-researcher, I was committed to conducting this study in a very fair and unbiased manner. My educational background, philosophies, and the close relationship I have with my daughter, Allie, continued to help me stay dedicated and objective throughout the study and accurately collecting and analyzing the data. I also collaborated with a research partner and research supervisor in order to maintain an

objective approach throughout this research project. To ensure trustworthiness and triangulation, I used prolonged engagement over a period of six weeks. The video analysis and reflections in the research journal were specific and detailed in order to accurately assess my sessions with Allie. Reflections were written immediately after our play and then I reviewed the video tape right after to ensure validity of my reflections and observations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although I planned this study in a very fair and unbiased manner, there were some limitations. First, the study yielded data collected from one participant.

Another limitation was the setting. Since the study took place in my home, factors such as disturbances from other family members and Allie wanting to play outside on a sunny day placed limitations on the success of the study.

The last limitation was the environment in which I was, at times, unable to fully complete my journal entries due to constant interruptions from other family members. I would need to stop what I was writing, and then return later on to finish my reflections. Delaying my writing led me to forget the specifics of what my thoughts were and what I did with Allie for that day. In order to become successful and prevent such limitations, I made sure to work in a quiet environment with Allie so that we were not interrupted from those around us. After each session, I would proceed into another room where I was able to write without being disturbed.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative self-study was to examine the ways in which I can encourage and support Allie's continued exploration with imaginary play. In order to gain a thorough understanding of my study, I collected data through the use of video taping and research journal entries. It was my hope that my findings would help me discover ways in which I can continue to encourage and engage Allie's thinking throughout imaginary play.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore ways in which I can facilitate Allie's imaginary play. The research strived to answer the following question:

How can I encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play?

Over a period of six weeks in the spring of 2014, I worked with Allie in the privacy of our own home in an effort to learn how to better support and encourage her imaginary play, specifically by using picture books as a way to scaffold her ideas. I was the sole participant in this self-study. I videotaped each session, reviewing and analyzing the videos repeatedly, looking for common themes. I also used a research journal with guided questions, recording my answers after each session to help me see any progress I was making and the adjustments I might consider making the next day.

As I analyzed the data, a few major themes emerged. The first theme was use of questioning techniques. The second theme was the effectiveness of role playing. The

third theme was using open-ended props. The fourth theme was modeling imaginary play. The fifth and final theme was my own personal growth.

### **Theme 1: Questioning Techniques**

One technique that helped me as the facilitator was questioning Allie during our imaginary play sessions. I found that by asking guiding, inferential and open-ended questions, it allowed Allie to expand her imaginary play by thinking outside the box and help her to learn more about the world her.

Questioning Allie throughout our sessions together was apparent in my video analysis. During the beginning of every session, I would always ask Allie the same question: “What does pretending mean to you?” I asked this specific question at the beginning of every session because I hoped to get a more detailed response by the middle of our 6 week study together. For example, instead of Allie’s response being, “Standing still,” I would hope by the middle or end of our session, her response would be more specific, such as, “I am a princess and you are the prince.” I asked this on the first day of our session together on April 21, 2014, and her first response was “To be a baby and jumping.” This gave me a good initial idea of how much Allie could describe to me about what imaginary play means. We continued our conversation that day with the following exchange:

Me: Let’s imagine this ball is something else.

Allie: A circle! No, an apple. (pretending to eat it)

Me: Is it sweet?

Allie: Oh yes, very sweet and crunchy! (looking around the room)

I want to pretend with the backpack.

Me: Okay, where should we pretend that we are going?

Allie: That we are going to school.

Starting off our session with a “warm-up” discussion of our thoughts and ideas about pretend play made it apparent that Allie clearly knew how to imagine in more than one way with the help of some guiding questions. The guided questions I asked were meant to push her thinking further. As I continued to prompt her by asking, is it sweet? She was able to pretend using one of her five senses that she had never done before.

As our sessions continued on, I noticed different responses every time I asked Allie the same question: “What does pretending mean to you?” On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 Allie’s response was “We laid down with blocks on our heads and belly.” This was an ongoing response for several sessions. This response was interesting because she was remembering back to the first day of our sessions when we read the book *Let’s Do Nothing* by Tony Fucile (2012). In one part of the book the two characters put blocks on their heads and stomachs. Allie mimicked this by doing the same thing.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> week of my study, Allie’s response was different. Her new answer to the question “What does pretending mean to you?” was “I want to pretend to be you and read the story.” This response proved that Allie had been closely observing my interactions with her and was showing a high interest in wanting to continue our imaginary play. The question that I asked may have also played a role in Allie’s response. She may have interpreted the word pretend differently by week 4 because of her continued engagement with imaginary play and what she now views it as.

In each session with Allie we started a new story. These stories were meant to enhance Allie’s understanding of imaginary play and help further her thinking. After reading stories to Allie, I then began to add questions to our conversations in order to scaffold her ideas. The following is an excerpt from the exchange between Allie and me

on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 after I read the book *That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown* by Cressida Cowell (2007).

Me: We are going to read *That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown*. (starting to read)

Allie: My friend Grace has a bunny.

Me: Based on the book, who should be Stanley?

Allie: Oh I know. Be right back! (bringing in her doll Belle)

Me: Oh, wonderful. What adventure should we go on today?

(We reviewed the long story quickly as a reminder.)

Allie: Oh, I want to scuba dive.

Me: Okay! Let's get our gear on to go in the water. What do we need?

Allie: Goggles to help us see.

Me: Okay, great, let me grab my glasses too!! We also need oxygen tanks. Let's use book bags as oxygen tanks to help us breathe under water.

Allie: Great idea!

Me: Now we need flippers to help us swim.

Allie: Oh, I want to use my princess shoes as flippers; and, Mom, you wear princess shoes also!

Me: Which way should we go?

Allie: This way.

Me: What are we looking for?

Allie: Looking for fishes.

The open-ended questions I asked Allie helped guide her and made her think more deeply about what she was doing throughout our imaginary play together. It allowed her to explore avenues and create new alternative answers or scenarios. She was more involved in our pretend actions with me when given questions that allowed for her to make all the decisions. My objective for this session was to guide Allie's thinking out loud through questions that lead her into the next idea such as, which way should we go?

Or what are we looking for? It was very apparent that the types of questions I asked brought in new ideas for Allie with higher levels of affective thinking.

Both symbolic and dramatic play allow both teachers and children to produce inferential talk at a more advanced level (Binici, Tompkins & Zucker, 2013). I used inferential talk throughout our sessions together, meaning that I asked questions that helped Allie to think a little harder, make connections and even guess in order to make an inferred decision about the topic of conversation we were having for that day. For example, I would ask her, “Just by looking at the story, what do you think a scuba diver looks for in the water?” Allie already had prior knowledge that there are different types of fish in the ocean so by her replying, “He looks for sharks!” she was able to make an inferential decision. These types of questions helped to extend Allie’s learning and thinking. It allowed for us to build on our discussions about the ocean and what scuba divers specifically look for. By talking about fish and other things in the ocean, it helped lead Allie into the right direction of where the story will take us to next.

I was impressed by the way she took the lead during our play together. By the end of our May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 session Allie was telling me what to do, which allowed me to play with her instead of continuing to prompt her with questions. Allie has been and still is very interested in what I say on a daily basis. She pays very close attention and it is very noticeable when I see her mimicking my actions shortly after I have done something. Allie wants to learn from me but also is a very independent young girl who wants to “show off” her learning skills to others so by her taking the lead, she is showing me she does remember the questions I’ve asked her. Allie had gained enough knowledge and confidence on what was being asked throughout our play sessions that she was now able

to think of her own creative ideas with me. I wrote in my journal reflection “Today was a very successful day with Allie. I learned that, when I asked her questions, she would respond to me and even added her own ideas!” I learned while playing with Allie that she can continue to lead our play; but, with the help of a few questions along the way, she has the ability to be as creative as she wants.

Some of the questions I asked Allie required a deeper level of thinking on her part due to the fact that they were not as familiar to her as other questions I have asked. For example, the question, “can we pretend to be a car?” surprised Allie. Her body language was dull and her confusion of how to be a car was obvious. Even though it wasn’t the response I was looking for, it was a question to ask in order for her to make more thoughtful decisions during play. At times she would respond well; other times she would move on and act like I hadn’t asked her a question. The following is an excerpt from April 23<sup>rd</sup>:

Me: Today we are going to pretend we are something or somebody else. What should we pretend to be?

Allie: I don’t know.

Me: If you could be anyone or anything other than yourself, what would you want to be?

Allie: (acting frustrated) I don’t know.

Me: Let me show you. I am going to pretend to be a frog. (I jump around the room saying “ribbit, ribbit.”)

Allie: I want to be a horsey. (She prances around the room saying “neigh, neigh.”)

Me: Great Job! Remember when, in the book *Let’s Do Nothing* by Tony Fucile (2012), we pretended to be a building and a tree? Can you pretend to be something that is not an animal or a person?

Allie: Hmm... (thinking for a while) I want to be a tiger “roar, roar.”

Me: Let me give you an example. (I crawled on my hands and knees and made the noise of a fire truck.) So what am I?

Allie: You are a fire truck!

Me: Yes, good! Now it’s your turn. Pretend to be something, and I will guess what it is.

Allie: Hmm... (She then gets on the floor and mimics what I did before but says she is a police car.)  
In this scenario, Allie responded to my questions but was still unsure of what to do. After I showed her an example she had a better understanding of what I wanted her to do. These types of inferential questions that require deeper thinking were good for Allie because she had never been in this type of situation before. The different questions that I posed impacted Allie's responses differently because her responses weren't as specific as I hoped it would be. For example the statement, "pretend to be anyone you want to be" was a confusing one for Allie. She required a very detailed and specific direction for understanding such as, "show me with your body how to be a tree." This kind of direction helps to scaffold her thinking and response because it requires Allie to think about trees, what they actually do and then acting it out. Asking a broad question with no example led to a less responsive reaction from Allie.

Pretend play provides an enriched experience of inferential talk (Binici, Tompkins & Zucker, 2013) so, when she had to think about what I was asking her to do or questioning her actions, she clearly showed me she was trying. Even though what she did wasn't what I was looking for, she was still able to engage in imaginary play and choose what type of animal and car she wanted to be. In my journal reflection after the session, I wrote "I noticed that harder questions were a bit of a struggle for Allie but by giving an example, she seemed to understand right away. I may need to work on using better word choices for next time." Throughout our play experiences together I found that Allie responded better when I asked questions that allowed her to expand her ideas and think a little harder. I noticed that Allie is still at the stage where she

appreciates and learns better when someone else is there to help facilitate and scaffold her ideas through questioning.

Different types of questions such as open-ended, guiding or inferential questions that I used with Allie resulted in different responses. This allowed me to assess how I was asking these questions or posing certain statements and why Allie responded the way that she did. When I asked Allie to pretend to be something other than herself, for example, a tree, she was very frustrated and confused. I obviously had to rethink the way I handled that question, so by modeling, Allie had a better understanding. Taking a more open-ended or guiding approach to the way I handled questioning was more successful because it gave Allie more free choice rather than direction, which she was not comfortable with. For example, as we were playing, I would help guide her imagination by asking questions that led her to her next idea allowed me to assess how far we can take her imagination. I noticed Allie becoming more interactive and leading our play with the help of scaffolding and guiding to help further her thinking.

## **Theme 2: Impact of Role Play on the Development of Imaginary Play**

Another major theme that I discovered when reviewing and analyzing the videos was how important role play was between Allie and me. According to Carlson, Tahiroglu & Taylor, “Role play is common and psychologically healthy” (2008, p. 150). Children who role play display more smiles and laughter with other children and also are more creative versus children who are not as engaged in role play (Carlson, Tahiroglu & Taylor, 2008). I found that it was important for Allie and me to perform in certain roles together because through guiding and facilitating Allie’s thinking throughout our

imaginary play sessions, she was able to show me her affective imagination which allowed her to resolve her emotions and further develop her creative side. Allie demonstrated a clear understanding of what role play meant by facilitating who would be, for example, the customer and who would be the waitress. She demonstrated she understood the difference between how to act as a customer versus how to act as a waitress after she had switched roles with me and by viewing my actions when performing these roles in front of her.

I noticed how engaged and excited she was to see me role playing with her. My whole objective was to make sure I was involved, enthusiastic, had appropriate facial expressions and was down at her level when playing. Allie and I had many sessions where we role played together. I found that by giving Allie detailed information on the topic we were currently involved in during our role playing session, she developed independence and confidence. I also found that Allie was interested in acting out new characters and jobs through the books that we read together. She became fully engaged in wanting to become these new characters she was learning about while incorporating a variety of different props throughout our play sessions.

Our first role playing session together was on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014, when we read the story *How To Get a Job by Me The Boss* by Sally Lloyd-Jones and Sue Heap (2011). I was impressed by how well Allie took the lead and made the decisions for both her and me. The following is an exchange between Allie and me when we were role playing:

Allie: Okay, Let's read the book again, and I'll be the teacher and you be the student.  
Me: Okay.  
Allie: Do you want to be a cowboy? Or a ballerina?  
Me: I want to be a cowboy. Let me get my cowboy outfit on.  
Allie: Do you need some help, student?

Me: No thank you, teacher.  
This scenario was the very first time we role played together; so it didn't last long, but by having this short exchange Allie had the opportunity to experience role play. This exchange allowed both Allie and me to view the different types of characters we were playing. It gave us the opportunity to view how we acted, what we said and how we physically interacted with one another. As our sessions continued, so did our role play and role play lasted longer in each subsequent session.

*How To Get a Job by Me The Boss* by Sally Lloyd-Jones and Sue Heap (2011) is a longer picture book that gives good descriptions and examples of the kinds of jobs the character in the story wants. For example, she first talks about wanting to be a ballerina but then moves on to wanting to be a teacher and continues on listing other jobs she is interested in, such as a doctor, dentist, etc... Therefore, Allie and I took a few days to cover this entire book.

What intrigued her most was when the character in the story talks about being a hairdresser. Allie immediately jumped up saying "A hairdresser! Let me grab a chair!" This was beginning of an intense role playing session where Allie was the hairdresser and I was the customer. We then switched roles so that she was the customer and I was the hairdresser. From April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014 here is an excerpt of Allie and me playing hairdresser:

Me: Okay, let me be the customer and you can cut my hair. Hello, I would like to get my hair cut?  
Allie: Sure, please sit down. (I sit on the chair in front of her.) Let me grab my styling bag. Okay, what would you like?  
Me: Can I have some bangs, and can you cut my hair shorter?  
Allie: Sure!  
Me: So do you like to cut long or short hair?  
Allie: I like short.  
Me: Do you wax eyebrows also?

Allie: Yes, let me do yours. (She uses a comb to brush them.) Okay. Look in the mirror.

Me: I love them. Thank you!

Allie: Okay it's my turn.

This was a very engaging and successful session because Allie was so involved in, and excited about, being able to play two roles—the hair dresser and the customer. I noticed that, when we switched roles, Allie now being the customer and me being the hair dresser, she mimicked the actions I took as a customer.

The following is a continued conversation between Allie and me on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014 during our role play when Allie was playing the customer and I was playing the hairdresser:

Me: Hello, what would you like done?

Allie: My eyebrows.

Me: Okay, let me put some wax on it. (making a shhh sound to mimic waxing)  
Did that hurt?

Allie: No I am okay.

Me: Let me do the other eyebrow. (shhhhh)

Allie: Okay, can you straighten my hair?

Me: Sure. So do you go to school?

Allie: Mrs. McClemmons and Mrs. Prescher

Me: Are they your teachers?

Allie: Yes.

Me: Oh, very good. So what do you think?

Allie: Can I look in the mirror? Oh, it looks very good. Thank you.

Me: You're welcome. You owe me \$15.

Allie: Here you go!

Me: Wow! Thanks for the \$5 tip!

Allie mimicked much of what I wanted done when I was playing the customer. To give her more ideas, I expanded on what I did as a hairdresser by asking casual questions about her life, added sounds that waxing eyebrows would make and made sure she paid me after I was all finished doing her hair. My goal during our role play together was for her to see the realities of what actually goes on in a salon. The customer asks for what he

or she wants done. The hairdresser washes, cuts and blow dries the hair, and then the customer pays at the end.

While we continued playing and switching roles, I noticed Allie progressively getting better with playing the customer and then hairdresser by going through all of the necessary steps such as, please sit down, how would you like your hair? Let's wash it now blow dry it. Even though she was mimicking my actions, she did add her own ideas by telling me "Now it's make-up time." I was happy to see Allie taking the lead and myself just playing along, following what she told me to do. Here's an excerpt from the exchange on the same day:

- Allie: Okay, now its make-up time. Close your eyes. (puts pretend eye shadow on)
- Me: How does this help?
- Allie: Helps your eyes look gorgeous. Okay, now I need to blow dry your eye shadow. Now I need to paint your nail polish. I have purple, green, black, white and red.
- Me: I would like white to match my outfit. (Allie pretends to paint my nails.)
- Allie: Want a different color? I have blue and black.
- Me: Let's do both blue and black.
- Allie: Okay, now I need to blow dry your nails.

It's apparent that Allie is intrigued by what she is learning. She becomes a close observer of my actions and what I say and then mimics them. But I was impressed when I noticed Allie taking the lead after awhile, once she became more comfortable with being the customer and then switching to playing hairdresser. This pattern showed throughout our sessions together.

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014 I read the story *Mitchell's License* by Hallie Durand (2011), where a little boy and his father are pretending and the father is the car and the boy is "driving" it. After I read this book to Allie, she immediately wanted to role play and

started taking the lead. The following is an exchange between Allie and me after reading *Mitchell's License* by Hallie Durand (2011):

Me: What should we do today?

Allie: Drive

Me: Okay, who should be the car?

Allie: You.

(I kept talking)

Allie: Mommy, cars don't talk! Okay, I need to drive now.

(We "drove" around the house, making beeping noises and mimicking the book's actions. We went back and reviewed the book as a reminder of how to check the car parts and do the other things that the boy did. We looked at what we did and how our actions were similar. We then "drove" the car again, filling in the missing pieces we'd forgotten the first time.)

Allie: I want to be the car and you ride on me.

Me: I'm a little too big. Who else should we have go?

Allie: Oh, I know. Baby Belle!!

(She drove around with Baby Belle, moved backwards and reversed and even got gas, making the sound as the tank fills up. She liked the gas part; so she wanted to keep doing that.)

Allie: Now it's your turn again.

Role playing with one another allowed Allie the chance to see one way that a character could be portrayed and, in addition, to gain knowledge about the world around us. She could not learn everything there is about being a hairdresser or how to drive a car unless someone else was there to give her the opportunity to be immersed in these different types of settings. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014 I wrote "Allie is so happy that we are role playing together. I noticed it's more effective when I am actively engaged with her by moving around and truly acting like someone other than myself." Allie grew confident enough to lead the rest of the sessions we had left together with me playing along with what she wanted me to do.

By me supporting Allie's imaginary play, she is now able to learn new things that she has never been introduced to before from learning how to be a hairdresser to driving a car or becoming someone else and learning about the important roles these other people

take on. This is the time when adult play with toddlers can change play from being “toy-oriented” to “people oriented” (Bodrova & Leong, 2012, p. 29). By scaffolding throughout our sessions, Allie was able to take her thinking to another level by the use of my questioning and role playing with her.

The books that Allie and I read together also helped to support and scaffold her engagement because we were using the books that we had read to help re-enact our role playing with one another. As we read the story, *How To Get a Job by Me The Boss* by Sally Lloyd-Jones and Sue Heap (2011), Allie’s interest really piqued when she and I read about being a hairdresser. We took that idea and continued with it using our own imagination. Children often play out scenes from books for enjoyment of experiencing the book through dramatic play (Rowe, 2007).

The picture books that I read to Allie throughout our sessions prior to us conducting our own play, allowed for Allie to see the story and what our dramatic play could look like after. Not only did the picture books help get Allie excited to re-enact stories, but it also guided Allie during our imaginary play. Allie became so comfortable with the story and applying it to her dramatic play that she took it to a whole other level by adding in her own ideas, props and casual conversation. Books can do wonders to a young child and one way to express this is by play.

### **Theme 3: Adult Use of Open-Ended Props Develops a More Imaginative Response from Children**

The next theme that was commonly found in my data analysis was the use of open-ended props. I was lucky enough to conduct my study in the privacy of my own home. Therefore, Allie had the opportunity to use anything around our home as props. By

providing children play items around the home and showing them multiple ways to use them, children might be more “imaginative than imitative” (Christie & Neilsen, 2008, p. 158). Open-ended props allow for children to choose any kind of prop they want during play. The role of open-ended props is for it to be any imaginary item that the child wants it to be. However, before a child can do this, they first should view a stick as not just a stick, but to detach it from its meaning by seeing the stick as something else, such as a sword. Allie did just this when she turned ordinary props, such as a box, into a new identity, which resulted in Allie’s positive engagement in our sessions together. Children are not limited to a certain prop to choose from, rather, having the enjoyment of using their own imaginations “by creating a pivot that consciously moves from one context to another” (Bomer, 2003, p. 227).

Props were first used on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014 after we read the story *Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis (2006). The story was about a talking rabbit who turned an ordinary box into many different things. I thought this was a great opportunity for Allie to turn a box that I provided into anything she wanted it to be. The value in this is by Allie demonstrating how she views and understands the world around her. Vygotsky’s theory was that people use “external devices to regulate their behavior and to make thinking possible that would otherwise be difficult” (Bomer, 2003, p.225). Allie used her own creative imagination by turning an ordinary box into a realistic tool. The setting for this session was our upstairs playroom. The following is an exchange between Allie and me after I gave Allie the box and asked her to turn the box into anything she would like:

Allie: I want to make it a cozy bed.

Me: What should we put in your bed?

Allie: Pillow and Blanket. (She then goes to her bedroom to grab these two props.) This is my bed, and it's cozy, but it's kind of hard!

During this time, Allie chose to think about what props would be most appropriate to use to make a bed out of the box. She chose her own pillow and blanket. She then realized that this still wasn't the solution to making the bed "cozy" so she moved on to turning the box into something else (just like the rabbit in the story). I was very impressed by the way Allie independently decided to turn the box into something else. I did not have to lead her in any way. She also demonstrated a true understanding of the text and a realization that a box can be turned into anything she wants it to be. We continued discussing different ways in which the box could be transformed into anything we wanted it to be.

Allie decided to take out her markers and color the box. She chose purple and assigned me the brown marker. While we were coloring, Allie asked that we write the ABC's on the box and then also color inside the box. Since we were working very hard on our box, I asked Allie "What are we going to make out of the box?" She responded with "Let's make a zoo in the box. We will make the cage."

Not only was I impressed with this wonderful idea Allie had created, but I was also interested in the props that she had decided to use. As we were working on our zoo, Allie proceeded to say that the animals needed to be fed. She looked around the room to find something to feed to the animals and decided to grab the tops off of her markers to use as food. These open-ended props allowed Allie to take her imagination to another level. Pretending that the tops of markers are food is a wonderful way to imagine. All of the open-ended props allow for a continued make-believe and free play in a variety of

contexts, resulting in a well educated and learned experience (Yelland, 2011). All of the open-ended props help support children's thinking and play by giving them the opportunity to change what they see in front of them into any imaginary object that they would like and apply it to their play scenario. Children may see, for example, a block, and view it as a piece of cake instead. It is an opportunity to take their thinking to a whole other level by playing freely and creatively and not be limited to rules and procedures to follow.

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, after reading the story *That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown* by Cressida Cowell (2007) we decided to pretend play in her playroom downstairs instead of upstairs. I chose this setting because I thought that switching the environment would allow Allie more opportunities to choose different open-ended props. We began deciding on the type of adventure we would like to go on. Just like Emily and Stanley in the story, Allie chose to scuba dive. The following is an exchange between Allie and me where we're deciding what types of props to use throughout our adventure at sea:

Me: Based on the book, who should be Stanley?

Allie: Oh, I know. Be right back! (She brings in her doll Belle.)

Me: Oh, wonderful. Okay, what adventure should we go on today? Let's review the adventures that Stanley and Emily went on.

Allie: Oh, I want to scuba dive.

Me: Okay! Let's get our gear on to go in the water. What do we need?

Allie: Goggles to help us see. (She grabs a pair of sunglasses and puts them on.)

Me: Okay, great, let me grab my glasses too!! We also need oxygen tanks. What should we use?

Allie: I don't know. (looks around the room for awhile)

Me: Let's use book bags as oxygen tanks to pretend to help us breathe.

Allie: Great idea!

Me: Now we need flippers to help us swim.

Allie: Oh, I want to use my princess shoes as flippers; and, Mom, you wear princess shoes also!

Allie used a variety of open-ended props to assist us in our adventure together.

She was very open to the idea of using things that may not be exactly the prop the girl in

the story used, but this showed me that she saw her toys as available for her to pretend that they were something else. Children communicate and see their toys as a supporter in dialogue or simply as a friend (Smirnova, 2010). I wanted to allow Allie to view her props as a supporter and use them as appropriately and as much as possible. Having many props visually available, Allie had easy access grabbing a prop to assist her in our play. She would grab something and immediately be open to pretending the prop was anything she wanted it to be. As we continued on our adventure, she stated that she found gold and picked up her beaded necklace as golden treasure. Using open-ended props is an opportunity for Allie to build her confidence and creativity as well as her knowledge about the world around her.

In other sessions together, she tried using props to match exactly what we were doing. For example, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014, after reading the story *Princess Me* by Karma Wilson (2007), a story about a young girl who pretends to be a princess and transforms her bedroom into a beautiful magical kingdom, Allie decided that we should pretend to be princesses as well.

We started off in the playroom upstairs but then moved into her bedroom after I read the story. Based on Allie's prior knowledge of reading other stories about princesses, she knew that they sometimes have tea parties. By Allie coming up with this idea, she demonstrated that she was constructing meaning by making connections between the text and what she already knew about storybook princesses.

She made sure to find tea cups and tea so that we could have a pretend tea party. In addition, she looked for realistic looking pretend cookies and cake and plates to put out during our tea party. We started acting like princesses and having a conversation back

and forth about how good the tea and cookies tasted. As we continued, Allie took the lead by stating “Let’s put my stuffed animals on the bed, and they can have a tea party with us!” After she put the animals on her bed, she then started to talk to them, encouraging me to do so also and offering them tea and cookies. I was happy that she took what she knew from the book that we read and added her own additional props and ideas to our pretend play session.

Allie demonstrated her understanding of the text, *Princess Me* by Karma Wilson (2007), by displaying many examples of what we read. The character in the story talks about how all princesses have princes and they all dress up and go to the grand ball together to dance. Allie insisted that she and I dress up and go to the ball together. I was the prince and she was the princess. I picked her up in my carriage and then we danced to our pretend music that was playing. At times Allie would refer back to the book for more ideas on what else princesses do. Children produce this type of play by re-creating story events to help with their social and cognitive development (Rowe, 2007). Allie was showing higher order thinking skills by developing a plan of what to do and then acting on it. She was synthesizing different information she was learning from the text and applying it to her play. This is another example of how using the text helped to support Allie’s imaginary play.

Many props were used throughout our imaginary play sessions, and Allie was able to choose what kind of prop she wanted to use, where to use it and how to use it. Sessions with open ended props provided opportunity for me to see how far Allie’s imagination can take her and how she applies it to play. I never restricted Allie to certain types of props because that is not the idea. The idea is for Allie to create her own

imaginary play and to choose whatever prop she finds appropriate. Allie did just that. Transforming toys or props to represent something from our imagination enables a child to transform her own feelings, consciousness and self-consciousness (Smirnova, 2010). By allowing Allie to create a unique situation with her props, she demonstrated her thinking to me. Allie viewed her props as imaginary things, for example, using the couch as a boat or choosing something to be a mask to wear when we went “scuba diving.” She was deliberately using her props as meditational tools that she was able to perform in front of me which helped me to further facilitate and scaffold her thinking during our play.

Reading the story *Mitchell’s License* by Hallie Durand (2011) also allowed Allie to use her imagination in a fun and exciting way. After I read the story on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Allie and I decided to mimic it and use ourselves as part of the props. I was the car, and Allie “drove” me around. We first had to decide what the car needed. The following is an excerpt from our conversation before we began our play together:

Me: Okay. If I am the car, where is the horn?

Allie: Your nose! (She squeezes my nose, and I make a beeping sound.)

Me: Great! How are you able to see out the window? What should we use as the front window of the car?

Allie: Oh, glasses. That is what the boy’s father wore. (She grabs the glasses and puts them on me)

Me: Okay. What about headlights? We need to see in the dark.

Allie: (walking over and grabbing her play microphone and play flashlight) These are perfect!

Me: Okay, we are ready to go!

I then started to “drive” her around “town.” When she remembered from the story that the car needed oil, Allie then became stuck on what kind of prop to use to fill the car up with oil. I needed to help her with this. The following excerpt is Allie and I deciding on what kind of prop to use:

Me: Okay, so if you need to fill me up with oil, what would be the best the prop to use? Let’s look around the kitchen. Maybe we can find something.

Allie: (She begins to look around, grabs a spoon.)

Me: This is good. Let’s try it.

Allie: (She opens my mouth and puts the spoon in it.)

Me: I don’t see oil. What is something we can use to put “oil” in?

Allie: Oh, wait, we can use water and put it in a cup!

Me: That sounds great. (We proceed to the cupboard and grab a sippy cup. I then fill it up with water and give it back to Allie.)

Allie: Open up your mouth so I can give you oil.

This session allowed Allie to look around the entire house for different prop options. She was able to understand that using props outside of the playroom was okay and even encouraged. In my journal entry on May, 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014 I wrote “The props that we used today really helped Allie open her eyes to new things. I need to keep doing this so she becomes more comfortable with using different types of items around the house.” I’ve noticed that as our sessions continued, Allie was more attentive into looking for more open-ended props. I did not have to guide her or give her any ideas. Allie was showing me she was beginning to understand what imaginary play truly means by feeling free to make independent choices

By using a variety of different texts, Allie's thinking was scaffolded, and she was able to develop more creative ideas and elaborate on them while incorporating open-ended or realistic props. The intersections between the texts that I used for Allie helped her to use her props in more than one way. They were a scaffold into Allie's thinking and allowed for pivots that turned her props into more than one meaning. For example, when we read the story, *Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis (2006), Allie gained enough knowledge after reading it together, to be able to turn an ordinary box into a bed and then a boat. The role of these props for Allie was to share her imaginative ideas and draw on her experiences, knowledge and feelings during our role play together. Allie used and saw these props in a unique way. By giving Allie the freedom to choose whatever prop she found appropriate during our role play, she was able to show me her developing and increasingly competent imaginative side.

#### **Theme 4: Modeling Imaginary Play**

Throughout my study with Allie, I found that it was very important to model play for her. When children are beginning to show signs of pretend play, "Caregivers become a model for children on which to base their own pretence" (Christie & Nielsen, 2008, p.152). This is valuable because children appreciate the roles that adults take on and they want to learn everything from them, so giving this opportunity, modeling for children is a wonderful learning experience for them. By having peer or teacher assistance, children have the ability to perform at a higher level than on their own, resulting in the child learning how to work or play more independently (Golding & Wass, 2014).

Even though Allie had proven to me that she can pretend during play, it was still noticeably clear that Allie needed a visual example before continuing. On April 21, 2014, the very first day of our session together, Allie needed some prompting and guidance along the way. After reading the story *Let's Do Nothing* by Tony Fucile (2012), we reviewed what the boys in the story were pretending to be. In one part of the story the boys acted as buildings so they had to be very still. I had to model this for her, because every time she would try to pretend to be a building, she would move. I had to remind her that buildings do not move. This continued throughout our session with me having to model, for example, how to be a statue.

I then proceeded to ask her “What kind of statue do you want to be?” She looked at me in dismay and said “I don’t know.” I then sat her down, just like the boy did in the book, and began poking her, acting like the pigeon in the story. She began to laugh, and I had to remind her not to move or laugh because statues don’t do that. Even though she didn’t grasp the concept the first day, I made it fun for her so she wouldn’t feel discouraged at all. As our sessions continued, I noticed that as I kept modeling for her, she began to understand better and became confident in what we were doing. By directing Allie to reproduce what the characters in the story did, she was gaining knowledge on how to pretend, the different ways to pretend, and what it looks like by just using our bodies, just like the boys in the story did.

Our very first day, I wanted to gradually introduce Allie to imaginary play, and this book allowed for Allie and I to re-enact the story and communicate together on why and how this particular pretend play looks like. My goal here was to start our very first play session by directing her. I wanted to build Allie’s knowledge so she could eventually

become more independent during play and allow more open-ended play after this very first session. I knew that Allie needed to gradually learn about pretend play and to have her understand the different ways to pretend and what it entails. This was a wonderful start to the beginning of my study with Allie.

A few weeks later, after I continued modeling how to pretend, Allie was showing significant progress. On April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 after we read and learned about different types of jobs from the story *How To Get a Job by Me The Boss* by Sally Lloyd-Jones and Sue Heap (2011), we talked together about what it's like to be a ballerina and what kinds of moves ballerinas have:

Allie: I'd like to be a ballerina

Me: What should we wear?

Allie: A dress. It's in my room. (puts on a red dress and white necklace)

Me: Okay, now that you're a ballerina, can you teach me some dance moves?

Allie: (She then does and has me mimic her moves.)

Me: Don't ballerinas also plié like this? (I showed her, and then she did it.)

Allie: Okay, I want to do it again. (She plies.)

After I modeled this move for Allie, she was excited to learn about something that ballerinas did that she never knew before. I continued modeling the different types of jobs people have, what the job entails and what types of clothes people wear. This continued on during several sessions for Allie to really understand the concept. That led to Allie wanting to do multiple jobs herself. The following is an excerpt from the exchange between Allie and me on what jobs she has chosen to do:

Allie: Okay, I want to be a ballerina. (She dances for a few minutes.)

Okay, I want to be a cowboy.

Me: Okay, let's get dressed.

Allie: I want to wear the vest and scarf. (She gets dressed and starts to ride the rocking horse in her playroom.)

Allie: I want to be that? (pointing to the book)

Me: The mermaidprincessballerina fairy?

Allie: Yeah. Let's get dressed.

Modeling is an act of encouragement and guidance. My objective was to model certain scenarios so Allie could build her knowledge about the world around her and become more independent. I did this throughout my entire six week study with her, not because I thought toward the end that she still needed it, but because I wanted her to have a better understanding of what ballerinas do or how a cowboy dresses, for example, and to know that there is not only one way to do something. Explicit teacher modeling leads children to develop “knowledge, skills, behaviours, conceptions and attitudes” that help to broaden the range of what they are able to do (Golding & Wass, 2014, p. 674).

By showing Allie many possibilities of being someone other than herself, she could see the world differently. For example, on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, I read the story *Can You Make a Scary Face?* by Jan Thomas (2009). It was a fun and interactive book that prompted Allie to jump, wiggle, dance and pretend. In addition to making a scary face, as the book directs, my goal was to expand on that and continue discussing other ways you can make a face because Allie had not yet developed an understanding of names relating to different facial expressions and this was an opportunity for me to introduce this to her. The following is an exchange between Allie and me while discussing different facial expressions:

Me: We made a scary face. Can you make a happy face?

Allie: (She tilts her head and smiles.)

Me: How about a surprise face?

Allie: Surprise!!! (opening her eyes wide and flinging her hands out)

Me: How about a curious face?

Allie: (She looks at me as if she doesn't know.)

Me: (I then model this for her.)

Allie: (She then mimics me, puts her finger on her chin and tilts her head, looking like she's thinking.)

Allie clearly showed that she was able to demonstrate multiple facial expressions to me.

However, when asked about making a curious face, she did not know how to show this. By modeling this for her, she gained an understanding of how a curious face may look while adding in hand gestures along with it. By asking specific questions and modeling examples of what different facial expressions look like, it helped Allie to gain knowledge with facial expressions and their specific related emotion, and also of her understanding by making the specific facial expressions.

During our session on May 12, 2014, I modeled not only how to act but also modeled facial expressions and showed my feelings in a particular situation. After observing Allie and noticing that she demonstrated the same expressions and feelings within her dramatic play, she needed to understand that she can act fearful, happy or sad while pretending. This was important because children need to experience different moods and learn how and when to appropriately apply them. After reading the story *Pretend* by Jennifer Plecas (2011), Allie and I had the following conversation when we were on our imaginary boat:

Allie: Look, a shark.

Me: Oh no!! What should we do? (acting fearful)

Allie: It's okay. The shark is nice.

Me: How do you know? (still acting fearful)

Allie: (pretends to pet it) See. It doesn't bite.

Me: Oh, good. I was worried for a moment.

Displaying my sense of fear and concern, examples of one of many multiple ways to feel, was something I wanted Allie to see. That while people can be scared of something, another person can show empathy by being calm and reassuring, such as what Allie was doing during our conversation about the shark.

Through my modeling actions, feelings, facial expressions and more throughout our sessions together, Allie came to understand how to display different feelings in imaginary play when appropriate. For example, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014, while pretending to have a tea party in Allie's room, Allie was eating imaginary cake and said "Yum. This cake is delicious." I replied "Yum. Yes it is. Mine tastes like strawberries. What does yours taste like?" She responded with "Mine is chocolate, yummy in my tummy!" We both were clearly pretending to enjoy our cake while making the appropriate facial expressions to match our feelings.

Modeling is an important component of pretend play. It allows a child to first observe, gain a better understanding of a topic and then try it out on his or her own. By having an adult act as a facilitator, it gives a child the knowledge that they are lacking and the motivation to learn more. By having an adult model imaginary play provides Allie with knowledge of different ways to use our bodies to pretend, what different jobs entail and how to explore a range of different emotions. Adults being present during play affects children's awareness of play and also playful learning (Crowley, Howard, McInnes & Miles, 2013). By being present for Allie to respond to any questions she may have or just assisting her in putting on play clothes, I know that I am being a positive role model for her.

Throughout my study with Allie, I found that by explicitly modeling and giving examples during our sessions together, Allie gained a better understanding about how to pretend. When Allie did not understand what I was asking her to do, visuals were another positive outcome. Allie gained enough knowledge to be able to do it independently. Allowing myself to act like a child was another good way to model play for Allie. I

wanted to play and think like a toddler. When I decided to let myself become one, I became a positive role model for Allie because whatever I was doing during our play, she wanted to do the same. Her excitement was evident and I could tell she really enjoyed watching me become so involved in our play sessions together.

### **Theme 5: Personal Growth**

The final theme that emerged was from my journal entries on my own personal growth as the facilitator. As a parent, it is very important to assess your day you had with your child. What was successful about today? How can I improve tomorrow? Prior to conducting this study, I never knew much about imaginary play and the true benefits of it. I would simply go into the playroom with Allie and play with her toys. I realized how repetitive it was becoming. We both were getting bored with playing with the same things. As I started researching imaginary play and the benefits of it, it occurred to be that we weren't taking advantage of this at home. By conducting this study, I found the skills that both Allie and I were lacking. During our sessions together, I would reflect in my journal, focusing on the following key components:

1. Body Language
2. Word Choice and Inflection
3. Encouragement and Support
4. Modifications

Body language was very important during our imaginary play time together. There was a lot of movement that she and I both created, such as swimming, riding on a

boat, “driving” a car and much more. Over time I made sure I was very involved and engaged in this type of movement.

I did notice myself, after viewing the videos and reflecting in my journal, that during our first session on April 21, 2014, I was not being as physically involved as I should have been, especially because it was the first day. I wrote “I was pretty disappointed in myself today. After going back and reviewing the video-tape, I stayed in one spot mostly the entire time, not allowing myself to get up to give more examples of how to pretend with our bodies.” I never realized that I wasn’t as involved as I should have been until I went back and reviewed the tape. I know that is it extremely important to be physically engaged with Allie because my body language shows if I am excited about what we are doing. If I am not, Allie may respond in the same way.

The next day I made sure that I was moving around, acting as if I were just another friend in the room. I continued to see improvements not only in my own imaginary play but also in Allie’s movements. I believe this was because I was letting myself become a child again and I wanted to experience what Allie was currently experiencing. I also wanted to teach Allie that we can use our imaginations anywhere at anytime whether it is real or imaginary (Agee & Welch, 2012).

I believe our most successful session was on May 14, 2014 when Allie and I pretended to be a car. Both she and I were very physically involved in more than one way. As I pretended to be the car, Allie rode on my back, and I “drove” her around the entire house, both downstairs and upstairs. In return, she did the same thing, “driving” around her doll Belle. After our session, I wrote in my journal reflection “I had so much positive comments to make about today. It was so enjoyable to see Allie laughing and smiling.

The more that I was ‘speeding’ around the house, the more Allie would want me to keep doing it.”

After comparing journal notes from the beginning of my study to the end, I am glad that I noticed my body language around Allie and changed it right away. I believe this change had significant impact on the way we played together. Allie was more engaged and responsive toward my actions with, for example, rowing a boat or swimming in the ocean. She wanted to repeatedly continue to play many of our scenarios over again which showed me that she appreciated our interactions between one another.

Not only is body language a key component, but also what I would say and how I would say it during our play. I noticed that certain word usages were not yet on Allie’s level of understanding. For example, on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014, I wrote “I need to make sure I adjust what I say to Allie. Using the words resume, interview, etc...was not very effective because she had no idea what I meant. I failed to explain this to her because she was not as involved in our conversation as I wanted her to be. Next time, if I try a different approach, then maybe she will be more encouraged to want to learn more.”

After thinking about different word choices for our next session, I decided to plan ahead. I wanted to make sure I said the right things and used an enthusiastic tone. On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Allie and I continued talking about jobs. As we reviewed the book *How To Get a Job by Me The Boss* by Sally Lloyd-Jones and Sue Heap (2011), she was very interested to learn more about being a hairdresser. I explained to her that hairdressers work in a salon. I knew she didn’t understand what salon meant; so I pulled out a few pictures of what one looks like so she had a better understanding of this. She was intrigued by how different each salon could look. We continued looking at pictures of

what the hairdressers do, such as washing hair, coloring, highlighting, cutting, and much more. From that point, she didn't want to look but wanted to pretend to cut my hair.

After our session I wrote in my reflection journal, "By making the necessary changes of word choices and by showing visuals, it was clear that Allie needed an example before she could move on. This not only gave her a better understanding but it also gave her the excitement of wanting to try it out." I had to constantly reflect on what word choices and intonations I was using for that day and whether they were successful or needed modifications for the next day. I know that Allie, like me, needs visuals sometimes to truly understand something. I noticed this, and it made such a significant impact in our continued imaginary play together. The role of language that I developed with Allie was one way to scaffold her thinking and for her to make sense of new concepts and vocabulary. It may have been a confusing part of our session together but with the help of images and examples, Allie became more aware of what I was discussing with her, which led to a successful play session.

Allie has a better understanding of a topic if she is given images to view. At times, I needed to show Allie pictures of what we were discussing during our sessions so that she could develop a connection between what she could visually see and what we are discussing. Allie has visited a real salon before so not understanding the word "salon" but instead, seeing an example, she could make the connection between a salon and the word "salon," and have more of an idea of what we are discussing. By viewing images of different salons, Allie now can create her own salon at home by using props such as a chair, a mirror and a check out counter. By having Allie view multiple pictures on the topic that we were discussing, I was able to help guide Allie's imaginary ideas during

play. With assistance, According to Vygotsky, individuals are able to perform and complete a task that they are not able to do on their own (Golding & Wass, 2014). Allowing myself to assist Allie in giving her enough knowledge that she needed, she was able to perform playing Hair Dresser correctly.

During my study with Allie and as I assessed my own actions, I believe I have grown into a more supportive parent who encourages imaginary play more than I had in the past. I became very cautious in how I approached each session, making sure I supported all of Allie's ideas and was involved 100%. I noticed this becoming a "project" to Allie as she would say to me after dinner "Mom, are we going to do our project tonight?" This was always so wonderful to hear because I knew that all the imaginary play that we were doing together was influencing Allie. I knew she was learning all that I had facilitated to her and that she wanted to learn more.

Our "project" became fun, engaging and active and Allie demonstrates a higher level of thinking than what she's used to. I believe this is because of how I scaffolded and facilitated each of our play sessions together. I enabled myself to guide her rather than lead her, which helped to build Allie's confidence, as well. I also learned that she enjoys my being involved with her in her play. She loves to see my reaction and encouragement while we play together. I learned that I needed to be engaged, active and supportive of her and become that friend for her to play with.

On May 2, 2014 I wrote "Allie laughed very hard today when I pretended that there was a bug on me. In fact, she wanted me to pretend this scenario over and over again." I learned that in order to be actively involved with Allie, I needed to "act" out my role to the best of my ability. I want her to view my actions as an example of one way to

show feeling during a pretend scenario. When Allie pretended that there was a bug crawling on her, I would encourage her to run around the house trying to get the bug off of her. I learned that it was such a fun way to scaffold our play because she enjoyed watching me watch her running around the house and acting so silly. I learned that by being encouraging and supportive during play, I would see positive results from Allie. Allie needed this to help strengthen her imagination. With my support, Allie found it in herself to lead our sessions and add her own ideas and thoughts, which was what I wanted her to do by the end of this study.

Modifications were made often. Some of them were minor adjustments, but sometimes major changes were needed. As I mentioned before, after the very first day I needed to make major adjustments myself. I needed to make sure I was more actively involved during play and not just sitting around observing and watching Allie. Every day I would get up and dance if that's what we were doing or run away from the crocodile that was chasing after us. I would dress up in different clothes to match the character I was pretending to be. Whatever Allie and I were doing, I made sure I gave it 110%. I learned that that in order to be a supporter of Allie during imaginary play, I should be as energetic and enthusiastic during our play sessions as possible. My journal reflections showed me what I was doing wrong or what changes I needed to make in order to see a better response in Allie.

By reflecting on the current day's session, I was able to understand that I needed to be more prepared beforehand so that we weren't wasting time gathering what we needed for that day. If I knew I was reading a picture book that involved constructing a crown, I would make sure I had paper, crayons, glue, glitter, etc...at hand so that Allie

and I wouldn't have to waste time finding these materials. I noticed that doing this saved us a lot of time. Allie was also more excited about what we were doing when it was right in front of us. However, there were times when I arranged for Allie to find props on her own to see what ideas she could come up with. Planning ahead made a big difference in how Allie and I played on the following day.

Overall, this research study provided me insight into the different ways that I can interact with Allie during our imaginary play together. I found that by being physically involved during our play sessions, Allie had a more positive response. The tone of voice and word choices that I presented to Allie were imperative so that Allie had a better understanding of what I was trying to facilitate. By having our sessions video-taped and reflecting in my journal. I was able to analyze myself and my actions in order to make the necessary modifications for the following day. I am now able to give her all the necessary skills she needs to continue to pretend play at home and at school with her friends.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative self-study answered my research question: How can I encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play?

I discovered that questioning Allie throughout our play together had a significant impact on the way Allie played. In addition, role playing together gave Allie the additional knowledge and confidence she needed to pretend to be someone else and to create a pretend scene. It was apparent that by allowing her to view my actions and own ideas when I was pretending to be someone else, she had the ability to grow more independent and begin leading instead of just watching and mimicking me.

Open-ended props allowed Allie to choose her own prop, whether just a doll or a metal pan from the kitchen, giving her the opportunity to use her imagination openly and freely and me the chance to see what kinds of new adventures she could take us on with these props.

Even though I modeled examples for Allie during our sessions together, she then learned and applied them to her own ideas later on. Her application of that learning demonstrated her understanding. Overall, this research study provided me with a better understanding of imaginary play and what I needed to do to improve Allie's thinking. I was able to learn and develop ways that helped facilitate and scaffold Allie's imagination.

### **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to help me learn ways in which I can encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play. The study examined the following question:

How can I encourage, support and scaffold Allie's imagination during play?

In this chapter, the conclusions made based on chapter four's findings will be discussed. I will then share how my interactions benefited Allie's imaginary play and discuss how other preschool students can benefit from incorporating literacy and play in the classroom. I will then discuss what my learning experience was with Allie and how my findings will impact my future students. Finally, I will make recommendations for future research.

## Conclusions

### Open-Ended Props Allow for Creative Thinking during Play

During my study with Allie, I made sure that she had as many props as possible to choose from during play. Some of these props included: a box, paper, markers, dresses, shoes and much more. This gave Allie the opportunity to be as creative as possible and allowed her to view these props as more than just their intended purpose. In order to play, a child sometimes detaches the object from its meaning. By detaching an object from its true meaning, children first stop seeing a stick horse, for example, as being just a stick to now a horse to ride on. The stick has now become a pivot into a new potential of meaning. Detaching objects allows children to develop new ideas, thoughts and language skills (Bomer, 2003). Allie was able to turn a box into a bed or a ship and sail along the sea looking at birds from her “telescope” that she made out of a paper towel holder.

As we read the story *Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis (2006), Allie was introduced to different ways of using her imagination by turning a regular looking cardboard box into something else. After reading the story, I then gave Allie a large cardboard box and asked her to turn it into anything she would like it to be. The following is a short exchange between Allie and me:

Me: Let’s turn this box into something else. What should we turn it into?

Allie: I want to make it a cozy bed.

Me: What should we put in your bed?

Allie: Pillow and Blanket. (She then goes to her bedroom to grab these two props.) This is my bed, and it’s cozy, but it’s kind of hard!

Allie clearly demonstrated that she was making meaning of the box that was given to her and did not view it as only a box. It was viewed as a tool that helped to support her in

thinking abstractly. Any tool that children use during play acts not as just a hammer, for example, but a “diagram, gesture, a process or a concept” (Bomer, 2003, p. 227). It was easy for Allie to immediately use her imagination and turn the box into a bed and later on a ship that we used to sail on the sea to Disney World.

Children who simply build structures out of blocks are not fully using their imaginations. By providing open-ended props in play, it helps to mediate children’s imagination in so many ways. Children may express themselves through a doll by replicating their own experiences and concerns (Smirnova, 2011) or by dressing up as someone else and creating their own scenarios. What ever it may be, children are transforming their feelings, thoughts and self-consciousness through play.

### **Modeling is Essential during Imaginary Play**

Before I began my study with Allie, I never took the time to investigate and learn about imaginary play and its potential impact on children now and in the future. My days with Allie consisted of simply playing with dolls, reading books, swinging outside and watching her favorite television shows. After conducting extensive research on imaginary play, I found that it has many cognitive, emotional and social benefits for children. Modeling and facilitating are effective strategies to help improve children’s play skills (Conner, Friehe, Kelly-Vance & Ryalls, 2014). Through modeling and example, children can continue to build their knowledge about the world around them and apply it to play. With that being said, I learned that modeling my actions during Allie’s play helped her to further her understanding of how to use her imagination.

When modeling, I know that introducing a fun picture book that helps promote imaginary play would allow Allie to have the desire to pretend on her own. Some of the

books that I choose include: *Let's Do Nothing* by Tony Fucile (2012), *Mitchell's License* by Hallie Durand (2011) and *How to Get a Job* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (2011). I began by reading the book of the day, which helped to set a foundation for our play afterwards.

When I was done reading, our conversation continued like this:

Me: We made a scary face. Can you make a happy face?

Allie: (She tilts her head and smiles.)

Me: How about a surprise face?

Allie: Surprise!!! (opening her eyes wide and flinging her hands out)

Me: How about a curious face?

Allie: (She looks at me as if she doesn't know.)

Me: (I then model this for her.)

Allie: (She then mimics me, puts her finger on her chin and tilts her head, looking like she's thinking.)

Modeling for Allie gave her a better understanding of what kinds of different facial expressions she could make. She seemed to be more comfortable mimicking my actions first, and then began to build off of that. For example, after Allie showed me her curious face, she proceeded to ask me if I could make a different facial expression, such as, a happy face. These picture books that I have used throughout my study became a vehicle for me to help engage Allie in her imaginary play. It was a guide for me to help facilitate and scaffold Allie's thinking during our sessions together. My goal here was not only to teach Allie but also to use the picture books as an aid in our thinking and imagining together.

According to Bodrova & Welch (2012), teachers should help support and model by showing children pretend actions and role play more often by practicing and performing with them. It may be needed for only a short period of time before children can go off and continue imaginary play independently. In just a short time, within one

part of a single session, Allie was able to demonstrate independence with imaginary play after my modeling. My role play and modeling provided her with a framework, and she was quickly able to work within that framework to create her own imagination. Modeling benefits children in multiple ways. They are able enhance their language through communication, understand how to share and take turns and also benefitting from a higher order of thinking during play. According to Golding & Wass (2014), Zone of Proximal Development is Vygotsky's term of space where learners can complete tasks with assistance that they can't complete independently. Modeling for children gives them an advantage of higher order thinking because of the types of questions adults are able to ask them. With assistance, children are able to perform the task successfully.

### **Open-Ended Questioning Techniques that Developed Thinking**

While conducting my study with Allie, I was able to find out what works and what doesn't work when I communicate with her. What I did notice was that if I didn't ask a lot of questions, Allie would just repetitively do the same things over and over again. For example, in the middle of the book, *How to Get a Job* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (2011), Allie was intrigued by what a hairdresser does at a salon, so she wanted to pretend to be a hairdresser. While we were playing hairdresser in the playroom, Allie would repeatedly have me lie down so she could wash my hair and then dry it. There was no conversation, she just pretended to wash my hair and dry it. I knew I had to start questioning her to help improve our play together. With myself still playing the role of the customer, I continued our conversation like this:

Me: "Can I have some bangs and can you please cut my hair shorter?"

Allie: "Sure! Let me grab my styling bag. Ok what would you like?"

Me: "Can you straighten my hair?"

Allie: "Sure!"

Me: "So do you like to cut long or short hair?"

Allie: "I like short."

Me: "Do you wax eyebrows also?"

Allie: "Yes, let me do yours." (She uses a comb to brush them) "Ok look in the mirror."

Allie: "Ok it's my turn."

Me: Hello, what would you like done?

Allie: My eyebrows.

Me: Ok, let me put some wax on it, shhhhhhh (sound waxing makes)-you ok?

Allie: yes.

Me: Let me do the other eyebrow. (Shhhhh)

Allie: Ok, can you straighten my hair?

Me: Sure. So do you go to school?

Allie: Mrs. McClemons and Mrs. Prescher

I realized that I needed to help guide her towards a new direction of questions so she was able to understand that there is more to being a hairdresser than just cutting and blow drying hair. I needed to educate her on what stylists do, such as, highlighting hair, make up application, nails and waxing eyebrows.

She seemed to enjoy learning about how to wax eyebrows and being able to perform this on me. When we switched roles, the first thing she requested was for me to wax her eyebrows. I continued with questions to lead us into engaging conversations one may have at a real salon. As I was asking her general questions, such as, "Would you like your eyebrows a little thinner? Or "Did that hurt?" The look on her face was an intriguing look and she really enjoyed the questions I was asking her. It was if she felt that she was truly at the salon. It made me feel that I was doing a good job at making it as realistic as possible.

When it was, again, Allie's turn to be the hairdresser, I noticed her taking the initiative to ask me questions such as, "Are you going out tonight?" "Who are you going

out with?” “What are you going to do?” I was very impressed by the questions Allie asked be during my time at the salon. It seems that when I played the hairdresser and I asked Allie, my customer, questions, she found it useful because when we switched roles, Allie now being the hairdresser, she used my same questioning technique on me.

When adults use inferential language with children, it can result in children demonstrating a deeper understanding and independently producing more inferential talk. Four levels of inferential questions that adults may ask children are level 1, matching perception, which is labeling or counting such as, “This is a hat.” Whereas, level 2 is selective analysis of perception, when the child is describing perceptual qualities like “The hat is very large.” Level 3 is a bit more advanced where the child is making inferences about perception such as, “Why are all of the children happy?” The final level, 4, is where children are predicting future events of “What do you think the teacher in the story will do next?” (Binici, Justice, Tompkins & Zucker, 2013). Inferential talk, especially with children who have not yet learned how to read, will help to build their comprehension skills and confidence in reading.

Not only is open-ended questioning important for pretend play but it also allows the child to demonstrate a higher level of play, enabling him or her to think more creatively and imaginatively (Conner, Friehe, Kelly-Vance & Ryalls, 2014). ). It also allows the child to develop his or her language and communication skills with not only the adult but with his or her peers. According to Conner, Friehe, Kelly-Vance & Ryalls, their studies found a significant increase in vocabulary and conversation skills amongst the participants when incorporating language during play (2014). These open-ended questions that Allie and I began to develop with one another helped to enhance her play

skills by fostering both language and social skills. Allie was very socially involved with me throughout my study and learned new vocabulary such as waxing and highlighting. By being involved in Allie's play, I was able to model new language associated with different scenarios. I was also able to guide her to use this language through questioning. For example, while playing the customer in a salon setting, I would ask Allie, "Can you please highlight my hair?" I then would explain to Allie what highlighting meant. The benefit of being exposed to new language and vocabulary allows Allie to now transfer the skill of questioning when playing with her friends.

### **Role Playing is an Aid into Learning about the World around Us**

I believe that role playing during imaginary play is very important in a young child's life. According to Carlson, Tahiroglu & Taylor (2008), children who engage in role play produce more smiles and laughter within social settings. Allie was very excited to role play and demonstrated a clear understanding of the different scenarios being performed throughout my study.

Throughout our sessions, Allie and I role played together. It made a huge impact on Allie's understand about things such as how a car works or how a princess should drink her tea. During one of our sessions together, Allie and I read a book called, *Mitchell's License* by Hallie Durand (2011). Allie wanted me to be the car and she would be the driver. Our conversation went like this:

Me: What should we do today?

Allie: Drive

Me: Ok, who should be the car?

Allie: You.

Me: (I kept talking)

Allie: Mommy Cars don't talk.

Allie: Ok I need to drive now

Allie: I want to be the car and you ride on me

Me: I'm a little too big; who else should we have go?

Allie: Oh I know, Sofia!! (Allie drove around with Baby Bell, moving in reverse and even stopped to fill up with gas, making sounds to denote gas coming from a pretend nozzle)

Allie: Now it's your turn again

Me: Ok.

Allie was fully engaged in our role playing together. She played her role very well and also reminded me that I was a car and cars don't speak. By reading the book for Allie prior to our play, she learned detailed information and new vocabulary about cars. Role play gives children the opportunity to experience new vocabulary that they may not use in their daily lives (Berenst, Deunk & Glopper, 2008). Allie learned that cars have wipers, they need gas in order to drive and they have lights in the front to help us see. In addition to the learned vocabulary, Allie also learned how to put gas in it. Allie's new knowledge was acquired not only from what she heard in the book, but also from her attention to my actions, demonstrating the correct way to pump gas. I also noticed that Allie transferred her knowledge about cars into her real world experiences. For example, the next day after we read the story, *Mitchell's license*, Allie and I stopped at the gas station so I can fill the car up with gas. She then reminded me that I was doing it just like in the story that we read.

During our sessions together, there were many opportunities for me to show Allie that what we did connected to the world around us. By role playing different types of jobs, for example, and learning how to go on an interview, Allie understood that people need to go on job interviews first in order to get a job. Sometimes people get the job and at other times they do not and that is okay. Children who display curiosity and are engaged during imaginary play are trying to make sense of the world (Berenst, Denuck & Glopper, 2008).

According to Berenst, Denuck & Glopper (2008), layered interactions are interpreted at multiple levels. Layer 1 is the base (or real world). Peggy and Alex are playing make believe together and layer 2 is the theatrical stage (pretend world) which would be two helpers fixing a boat. These layers are the connections children understand and combine using their own world knowledge and this is how they process this information.

### **Implications for Student Learning**

#### **Children's Creativity Begins to Develop during Imaginary Play**

According to Kudryaytsey, 2011, children's ability to adopt culture in the form of problems, instead of answers already given to them from their adult models, demonstrates children's "independence, initiative, and creative ability" (p. 51). When providing children with answers and not allowing them to investigate and construct their own meaning, true learning or understanding of a concept may not be fully developed. Adults cannot teach children the right way to use their imaginations for imaginary play, especially when children have no conceptual knowledge of imagination. However, adults can foster the idea of imaginary play, thus encouraging creativity.

Allie has always been an outgoing, personable little girl. Prior to conducting my research, she had some experience with imaginary play such as feeding a baby and playing teacher, but never anything new and different. What I believe is most important in play is to allow an adult to model new experiences for children to help develop more confidence and independence. Using imagination is important for children because it provides them with a sense of ingenuity and helps them achieve success in our "global 21<sup>st</sup> century economy" (Eckhoff & Urbach, 2008, p. 179). Facilitating creative thinking during imaginary play is important for developing the next generation of innovators. Our

economy is positively affected by new ideas and discoveries. These ideas have benefitted our economy in many ways, such as socially becoming more involved with one another through the use of social media like Facebook or Skype. These inventions will continue to blossom as long as we continue to support and encourage creativity with our youngest generation. After conducting my research, I believe I gave Allie the right support in helping her expand her creative thinking during play.

Allie always looked to me as a guide into the start of our imaginary play together, especially in the beginning of conducting my research. I didn't want this; I wanted Allie to lead me into what she wanted to play, what props to use, and what my role should be. She needed to become more creative in what she was doing. By the end of our sessions together, Allie was beginning to take the lead and decide what kind of play she wanted to create. I was just the other person doing what she told me to do. We had many scenarios where we both were role playing and assigned one another particular roles. This was fun because I was able to see more of Allie's creative personality shine through and she also saw my reactions, tone of voice and props I took out for myself when I was playing someone else. I added my own creativity when we played by making my own props. For example, I used different colored play dough to make my own pizza. She was able to learn from me by viewing my actions, which enabled her to develop more creative ideas when deciding what she likes and dislikes about imaginary play. Adults can help foster children's play by combining multiple purpose props with realistic ones that will help keep play going (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 52).

Some young children at one point or another may not have enough knowledge to become confident enough to establish their own imaginary way of thinking. Children will

benefit greatly if they have an adult model imaginary play scenarios for them. This will lead them into a better understanding about the world around them and become more comfortably in creatively leading play instead of relying on others.

### **Adults Actively Involved during Imaginary Play Gets Children Excited**

I have always played with Allie, but looking back, I would always have to stop what I was doing to help her brother with something, clean up the kitchen or make the beds. I would never truly take the time to sit and play with her, listening to her thoughts and ideas. Being able to conduct this very important research has allowed me to become more actively involved with Allie during our play time together. Adult-child interactions need to be present in order to maximize children's playfulness and learning (Crowley, Howard, McInnes & Miles, 2013).

Allie and I have learned so much from one another during our 6 weeks of imaginary play. I noticed that when I gave her 100% of my attention, she was more excited to play together. Using a specific tone of voice, questioning and allowing her to take the lead, gave her the ability to continue our imaginary play scenario based on what she wanted, not what I wanted. Adults need to engage and interact with children so that they may build on their own activity choices, rather than the adult making activity choices (Crowley, Howard, McInnes & Miles). Any time Allie would ask me to do something, acting like a princess, for example, I would not only act like a princess, but talk like a princess, dress like a princess and have a conversation with Allie like a princess. She loved every moment of it and played right along with me. I know that her seeing me as a play companion, rather than her mother, made it that much more fun and engaging for Allie.

After this study, I now know that playing with not only my daughter but any young child is imperative in order to create a more engaging, active environment where being enthusiastically involved in play gets children excited to learn.

### **Making the Right Choices for Imaginary Play**

I have always believed that active play is very important in a young child's life. Moving around, making decisions and learning about the different ways of showing emotion during play helps children to develop socially emotionally and physically. My beliefs provided me with a benchmark of which to analyze my own actions and choices when playing with Allie. By carefully planning and making the right choices prior to play, I gave Allie more of an opportunity to have fun and be fully engaged in our imaginary play together.

Children are naturally active human beings. They love to run and jump around. It is rare to see a 2 year old child wanting to watch television all day long. Therefore, my prior knowledge of this led me to make the right choices for Allie when it came to planning our sessions together. I knew I wanted to find picture books that gave Allie the opportunity to move around as much as possible. During every session that I conducted, Allie and I were always moving around. A few examples of this were when Allie and I built our own "boat" out of a cardboard box and pushed it around the room, pretending we were in the water, or when we were both taking turns playing the role of a car, "driving" one another around the house. Movement during pretend play helped Allie to stay motivated and engaged because it helped her to continue to be involved in what we were doing. I noticed if during one session her and I weren't moving around as much, she

didn't seem connected with what I was trying to introduce. So I learned that by being active and engaged with Allie, she would have a positive response back.

During my study, I noticed Allie becoming more socially involved with me by leading our play, and telling me what role I should take on and how to act. Her knowledge was growing throughout our sessions together due to the choices that I made while playing with her. I even noticed Allie going up to her brother and asking him if he wanted to play hairdresser with her. The choices that I made with her, by asking questions and building her knowledge of what we were playing, allowed Allie to be confident enough to teach her brother what she had learned without my direction or help. My decision to have open communication with Allie and model sharing skills encouraged Allie to share and communicate with her brother during play. During play, especially unstructured play, children may form disagreements and argue. Careful adult planning prior to play can prevent conflicts amongst others (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). I continued to observe Allie's actions and she respectfully asked her brother questions and allowed him to take turns playing the role of the hairdresser. I believe that through my modeling and interactions with Allie she was able to learn to play with her brother with fewer conflicts. By becoming socially involved with one another, children can naturally learn how to communicate and make decisions together without the help of an adult. This builds children's sense of confidence and trust for other peers.

Prior to conducting my research, Allie and I never talked about the different kinds of emotions that people can have. As I introduced this topic to her, I demonstrated what various emotion-filled faces may look like. I decided to choose a wonderful story called; *Can you make a scary face?* By Jan Thomas. It's an interactive, fun book that allows the

reader to play along in a game of Let's Pretend. It allowed for Allie to make both silly and scary faces throughout the story in an attempt to get a bug off of her body. We had a lot of fun with this. She was able to see my faces as well and mimicked some of my actions. The level of engagement the child has indicates the amount of empowerment the child will feel and demonstrate in a play space (Canning, 230). Allie was very involved and engaged during this session and seemed to enjoy taking the lead after a while.

My modeling enabled Allie to participate in the activity, providing her with a sense of empowerment and raising her level of engagement during play. The decision for me to make these faces gave Allie the excitement to immediately show her dad what she learned. He reread the book to her and she showed him the faces to make. Having more than one adult present to model play is another wonderful way for a child to learn because it reinforces what the child was first introduced to and it gives the child a more confident attitude to become more independent during play.

All of my choices during imaginary play gave me more of an insight on how to accurately plan ahead so that Allie has the best possible experience with me. Allie grew confident enough to independently show her family members what she has learned. It is my hope that she continues to be just as confident and engaged at school with her classmates as well.

## **Implications for My Teaching**

### **Adults and Teachers Modeling Imaginary Play Helps Build a Foundation for Children**

Adults should always allow children to think freely and have fun with play. However, sometimes they need a little help getting started, especially during pretend play. The adult model “needs to explain the purpose of the play behaviors, their sequence and their cause-and-effect relationships” (Bodrova & Leong, 2012, p. 32). For example, if a child wanted to play restaurant but does not know what it entails, then the teacher, parents or any adult in the room can help by giving examples or helping to facilitate by asking questions like, “What is the first thing we do when we go into a restaurant?” or “Who should be the customer and who should be the waitress?” Guided questioning allows for children to still be independent while building their understanding about the world around them. Adults and teachers can also model imaginary play with their tone of voice, facial expressions, what they decide to wear and so much more. Modeling gives children the idea of how to not only think of ways to pretend, but also, the different ways in which they can act and feel. For example, when Allie and I played hairdresser, I changed the tone of my voice and facial expression. It was an opportunity for me to pretend to be someone entirely different than myself and to show her what this can look like. By changing my voice tone, Allie had full enjoyment watching me act like someone else other than her mother. She enjoyed playing along; answering questions that I wouldn’t normally ask her on an every day basis, such as “are you going on a date tonight?” This made it a fun bonding experience for the both of us and it even encouraged Allie to change into a whole other person when we switched roles and she played the

stylist. Parents should encourage their children to “act out” a variety of roles that they may be interested in exploring (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). I always engaged Allie in many different role play scenarios as possible. My modeling helped to encourage and empower Allie to take risks by pretending to be someone she is not. While I fearlessly demonstrated my abilities to pretend to be a cowboy or a waitress, Allie had the realization that she can also be someone else while having fun as well.

Prior to conducting my research with Allie, and as a teacher in the past, I would always teach my students the topic of the day, give them an assignment, and *expect* to see wonderful work; however, my expectations were not always met. I would always have hands being raised, kids asking questions or being confused on what to do. I never realized until after that that they needed an example before trying it on their own. I would always think to myself, “Why don’t my students understand?” and “I taught them everything I was supposed to, why don’t they just go do the work?” Well, yes, I was doing what I was supposed to be doing; teaching them, however, I wasn’t giving them examples of what the work should look like in the end. They needed visuals in order to gain a better understanding of what I wanted them to do.

Now, present day, I am more knowledgeable in understanding what children need: examples from us, the adults. Modeling should never be looked down upon or viewed as negative when it comes to imaginary play. Adults are who children look up to. According to Smirnova (2011), adults and their actions set examples for children. I know that when I am playing with Allie, she is constantly looking at what I am doing, how I am performing and why I am acting a certain way. She really enjoyed watching me become someone other than myself because she is so use to me being “mom” all the time.

Children want to act as adults so being able to model for them more about the world helps them to have a better understanding which will enable them to continue expanding upon play scenarios.

### **Adults and Teachers Should Allow Children to Take the Lead During Imaginary Play**

After the adult or teacher models an imaginary play scenario, they then should have the children continue to imaginary play on their own. Often times I have seen or heard from other people that their child wanted to use, for example, their pots and pans as a drum for a band. Their reactions were, “No honey, use your drum I bought you a few months ago, that’s why we bought it.” This is just one example of adults not allowing for their child to openly use any prop in the house as something other than what it was intended for. Another similar situation occurred in Allie’s preschool classroom. I went in to volunteer one day and looked around the room to see the basic toys; dolls, shopping carts, trucks, puzzles and so on. I was disappointed; I wanted to see open-ended props such as clothing, sticks, a corner of just paper and crayons where children can create anything they want by using their imagination. These are just two examples that teachers and adults should think about when it comes to imaginary play. If a child wants to use pots and pans to bang on, allow them to do so. “A good toy is an ‘introduction’ to the world for children – their own voices, actions and movements” (Smirnova, 2011, p. 39). Whether it be a wooden spoon used as a microphone or a toilet paper roll used as a train engine, children should be encouraged to utilize their surroundings. By allowing children to take the lead, adults are able to help foster rather than lead imaginary play.

During my sessions with Allie, I always read our picture book in the beginning to help build our foundation of what we were going to play for that day. After this, I allowed Allie to take the lead. She was able to pick any prop in her playroom, the kitchen, her bedroom, basically anywhere she wanted to choose to play. Self expression allows for children to understand themselves more and the events of their own lives (Smirnova, 2011). Throughout our time together, I did have to offer some ideas, but these few ideas led to something big in Allie's mind. She used this to her advantage by building upon what I told her, helping her to create her own imaginary play. In the end, I was just in the room, following her lead, doing what she was telling me to do.

Teachers and adults need to continue to learn and understand that children have more of an imagination than we do; we often close our minds too soon to see what's really out there. Adults' memory of their own play experiences may influence the way they think play should be and not from the perspective of the child (Canning, 2007). Adults who aren't allowing themselves to understand a child's way of thinking are limiting children's learning needs such as, exploration and discovery, which are important for their future learning. According to Bomer's (2007) work with Vygotskian theory, "A child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality" (p. 227). Every child is creative in their own way, making them who they are, so by expecting them to take the lead, we are not only teaching them, but they are also teaching us as well.

Allie taught me to just have fun with play and to allow myself to let go and be a kid again. It was a very rewarding experience that I had with Allie and I am now knowledgeable to continue to foster Allie's imagination from this point forward.

## **Teachers Must Continue to Reflect At the End of Each Day**

As both a teacher and a mother, I always felt the need to reflect at the end of each day, whether it's something as little as remembering to brush my kids' teeth or something more important like if my students grasped the concept of the addition strategy I taught them. Regardless of what it is, it's always important to reflect because we are always learning every day from our children and our students and it's important to think about what went well and what needs modification for the next day.

My journal entries have helped me to deeply reflect on my day with Allie by focusing on my tone of voice, my reactions toward play, and my level of participation. All of these components allowed me to adjust the next day accordingly and to see these changes in action rather than just ignoring them. I saw progress immediately and felt that my journal entries as well as my video-tape analysis gave me constructive criticism that I felt I needed to grow as a teacher.

I highly recommend that educators to keep a journal at their desks for reflection at the end of the day. It may be dedicating another 5 precious minutes, which can sometimes be a struggle, but it can make a big difference in students' lives and in a teacher's craft as well. Developing a reflective practice results in effective reflective practitioners (Akinbode, 2012). Through journaling and reviewing my video-tapes with Allie, I noticed positive outcomes and things that I needed to change and/or modify for the next day. I felt that by viewing my actions with Allie, it truly benefited my perception of how well I was interacting and playing with her. In addition to writing down my thoughts, I had a clearer understanding of how well I was facilitating and scaffolding Allie's play. As progress was made, I realized it was because I was being very aware of

my actions and responses towards Allie. If I didn't reflect daily, I believe I wouldn't have been as successful in the end.

Continued reflection is an important component of the teaching profession; however, the action preceding that reflection is even more valuable. Reflection allows educators to work towards self awareness in the practice situation and allows them to reframe "ideas in order to develop a more ethical, responsive, and supportive" (Akinbode, 2012, p. 72) teaching environment. It was not only important to modify the next day's session with Allie but to constantly reframe my work to make sure it was accurately supporting Allie's needs. Teachers should look at all aspects of their teaching practice, not only at how well the students learned that day but also at how well they, as teachers, responded to their students' needs or if they were emotionally and physically involved in their lessons.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

#### **Explore Whether Researcher-Participant Relationship Aids in the Development of Imaginary Play**

When I conducted my research, I already knew a lot about Allie and what she understood and did not understand about imaginary play. Based on what I knew, I thought I had an advantage by choosing books I knew she would be interested and engaged in. At times, when Allie was not as engaged or involved in our imaginary play, it was because I am her mother and she was able to get away with it. I believe this caused some conflicts throughout my study with Allie. I also thought that being in the comfort of our own home had its disadvantages as well. While conducting the study, usually after dinnertime, Allie and I would go upstairs and begin our session. Her brother, who is two

years old, would want to come upstairs to see what we were doing which would distract Allie's train of thought. I would have to redirect her to what we were doing once her brother went back downstairs.

For future research, I would be interested in working with an older child, preferably of kindergarten age, who is my student and not my own child. I would also find it beneficial to conduct my sessions in the student's classroom where there are already books and props available to choose from because it is an environment where the student is not as distracted and resources are easily accessible the student.

### **Explore Whether Setting and Researcher Participant Aids in the Development of Imaginary play**

While I was lucky enough to have had the opportunity to conduct research with my daughter, I was limited to only a six week study period in which I, the sole participant, video-taped my sessions and reflected in my journal immediately following the end of our sessions each day. Although my methods assisted in ensuring that the research was performed in a credible and valid way, it is possible that my bias played a role in my journal reflections and video analysis.

For future research, I would be interested to see more data being collected by more than one participant, as well as in a classroom setting, rather than a home setting. Having more than one teacher reflect and analyze, just as I have independently, based on the ways that they helped facilitate and scaffold their students' pretend play, would benefit each other by collaborating and comparing their results at the end of each day, and discussing ways in which they can change or modify the next day's activities for their students. I know that it takes more than one point of view to assess a situation,

therefore, by having more than one teacher in the room, it would seem more of a valid conclusion when discussing the outcomes.

### **Explore Whether Students Truly Do Need an Adult to Model and Facilitate Play**

This study focused on me and my limited knowledge of imaginary play. Due to the fact that this research was based on how I could help facilitate and scaffold Allie's thinking, it would be beneficial to find out if children can learn from one another about imaginary play in addition to having an adult continuing to model play. Teachers can observe and study the children interacting with one another during play instead of having the research focus on the adults as the participants. The data could be collected based on the students' behaviors towards one another, decision making, sharing, thinking of new ideas and the types of props they decide to choose. Questions teachers could think about could be, are the children learning from one another, are they thinking about new imaginary play ideas or are they playing the same scenarios over and over again, why did they choose these particular props? In the end, the results can give teachers an idea of if they are truly needed to help children learn more about imaginary play or if children can learn from one another.

### **Final Thoughts**

Children today have been lucky enough to enjoy learning and working with Smartboards, iPads and iPhones. Even though these are very beneficial tools, technology has also steered children away from what is also very important, and that is imaginary play. Children who watch educational shows and interact with different types of technology, even if carefully selected, cannot replace live play mentors (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). It is important in all aspects of life that children grow up to be confident,

independent and learn to make decisions on their own. Imaginary play will help support this.

As this study has shown, it is important for adults to make the right choices and continue to encourage children to use their imaginations during play. Adult modeling and asking guiding and open-ended questions prepares children for the real world and allows them to explore their thoughts more freely. Children who take the lead along with role playing and adults modeling with them builds their creativity, confidence and knowledge about the world around them. Teachers, parents and any adults working with children should always remember to never forget to listen and learn from children's own ideas because we were once children too and we used our imaginations during play as well. We need to open our minds to the endless possibilities of what children can create during play, and to encourage and promote their imaginations as much as possible.

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