WHEN IT’S CHOOSING TIME: 
BOYS’ Multiliteracies at Play

by

Kimberly Bezaire

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
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Abstract

"Why are you researching us?" ... "Are you a spy?"..."Are you taping right now?" asked children at the ‘Community School,' in those first moments of this qualitative study. This thesis contributes to the growing body of social research in the field of early childhood education, viewing children as capable and competent meaning makers, engaging their input as ‘agentive researchers,’ and reconceptualizing research methodology, play theory, and early childhood teaching practice.

Changing contexts of 21st century childhoods, as well as new theories regarding literacy and meaning making, prompted this research involving a reconceptualization of play and its value, within the context of multiliteracies theories and holistic education. This process of reconceptualization was informed by observation (playscapes, places, props, plots, partners and practices) of boys at play considering their meaning-making processes.

Through participant observation in a full-day Kindergarten, play episodes were documented (i.e., digital videography, photography, audio recording, field notes, collection of artifacts) and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Three broad themes emerged. First, physical and social aspects of the Classroom Play Environment were found to be influential in creating conditions for play, influencing the quality of engagement and learning. Ample time, space, freedom of movement, and access to plentiful creative materials were important in children’s active play and meaning making processes. Common behaviourist classroom management techniques were avoided in favour of social constructivist approaches, which promoted children’s
self-regulation with an aim to recognize and foster their sense of agency, and support emergent play-literacy practices (Hill & Nichols, 2006).

Second, children’s explanations regarding the source and inspiration of play themes and interests prompted a reconsideration of ‘spontaneity’ as foundational to a Definition of Play. Defining play processes as “multiliteracies”, and play episodes as “text”, play ideas were found to be intertextually linked to multiple texts including picture books, multimedia, and iconic texts.

Third, Boys’ Play was observed to involve much movement combined with rough and tumble, pretend, construction, and word play, prompting a re-consideration of ‘narrative’ within the context of play and literacy research literature. As well, boys inquired about gendered play objects and identities in complex and personal ways.

This digital thesis document utilized a multimodal design, embedding visual and audio text, creating a new multimodal thesis form with an aim toward considering all modes of meaning making as equal, rather than emphasizing or privileging print text (Jewitt & Kress, 2003).
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Dedication

Dear Michel, our boy, this thesis is dedicated to you - there every step of the way, growing as this thesis grew. This is dedicated and inspired by you in very complicated ways, but with a simple mother’s love.
CHAPTER ONE: ROOTS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The roots of this study are grounded in my experiences – personal, professional, and academic - and in the context of important and significant changes to the place of play in children’s lives and within the field of early childhood education. The digital and global age have changed so many aspects of how we live and learn in the 21st century, where the promises and perils of a highly technological-digital world are hotly debated issues, which continue to have a great impact on what we view as important for our children and ourselves. At the outset, I wish to state my research questions and focus of this study, including:

1. How can play (the value of play) be conceptualized (reconceptualized) within the context of multiliteracies theories?
2. What playscapes, places, props, plots, partners, and practices enrich/facilitate/correspond with literacy development, essentially meaning making processes?
   a. In the context of differentiated learning, what is the influence of boys’ play on literacy development?
   b. What inspires, engages, and enriches boys’ play?

With recognition of the impact of early years education on the present and future success of our youngest citizens, what makes a difference and matters most in classrooms and communities takes on greater importance. Recently, Charles Pascal (2009), Special Advisor on Early Learning to the Province of Ontario, released his major report With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario, outlining a clear vision for implementation of a universal, full-day early childhood education program based within the Ontario public school system. This proposed program offers a potential national and international model for early education, heralded by leaders in education, government, economic development, child welfare and advocacy; some responses include:

Rich and deep in substance, this early learning blueprint provides the missing link in Ontario's education reform strategy, giving the province the opportunity to take its already highly regarded world-wide education
reputation to become the global leader when it comes to the development and performance of its children and youth.

Dr. Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

This report fully captures what's best for young children and their families and brings together a comprehensive plan to implement some very key ideas from our Royal Commission on Learning.

Honourable Monique Bégin, Co-Chair, Royal Commission on Learning; former Minister, National Health and Welfare; Member, World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health

This groundbreaking report underlines the critical importance of early learning and care to the health and wellbeing of Canadians. Premier McGuinty's vision and this report provide excellent guidance for what governments across Canada must do.

Honourable Roy J. Romanow O.C., former Premier of Saskatchewan; Commissioner for the Future of Health Care in Canada; Chair, Canadian Index of Wellbeing Advisory Board. (McCuaig, 2009)

Working as a research consultant for the Ontario Elementary Teachers’ Association (OECTA) in the Spring of 2008, I participated in writing a position paper on full-day Kindergarten, which further highlighted and contextualized my motivation for this doctoral work and its potential contribution (OECTA, 2008). This review of academic, government and professional literature revealed a clear body of evidence confirming the benefits of quality early childhood education – specifically the many ways in which full-day, as compared to half-day, kindergarten offers a range of benefits for children, teachers, and parents. A key finding focused on the question of skills-based, academic instruction, as compared to play-based learning. The review concluded:

Experts caution against didactic academic instruction in full-day Kindergarten (Gullo, 1990; Olsen and Zigler, 1989), advocating, instead, for developmentally appropriate programming, characterized by child-initiated activity in the classroom, first-hand experience and informal interaction with objects, peers and teachers (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; Elkind, 1988; Rothenberg, 1995). (p. 23)

Despite expert findings supporting play-based learning in Kindergarten, society stakeholders often question devoting funding to play-based learning programs, in favour of “schoolification” as a means of legitimizing early years education initiatives (Pascal,
2009, p. 25; Alliance for Childhood, 2009). Although ample research evidence supports play as an educational activity, elementary school teachers report pressure to prepare children for the next grade level, to perform, compete, perfect, and meet standards or risk stigmatization. Others question the value of play and emergent curriculum in today’s classrooms – is it worth risking the disapproval of a principal, or the contempt of colleagues who might equate controlled, structured classrooms and curriculum ‘management’ with effective teaching? Don’t children need to learn about ‘the real world’ with routine and expectations? What sort of real teaching and learning could be happening in a noisy, chaotic classroom?

When facilitating teacher workshops, graduate and initial teacher education classes, and focus group discussions on early years education, I continue to be challenged by teachers who wonder how to reconcile what they know and feel about the importance of play in the classroom, with pressure to achieve prescribed performance levels in reading, writing and numeracy. How can the benefits of play be clearly articulated and understood, and what evidence may offer support to those who defend play as an opportunity for experience and learning?

**Changing Childhood**

Freeplay, experiential, hands-on learning – these are the types of activity that many teachers, parents and researchers fear are missing from 21st century childhood, as educational and paediatric health experts warn that essential opportunities for play are indeed threatened, and diminishing in quantity and quality. The focus of this research has been influenced by publications from The Alliance for Childhood (2004), American Academy of Pediatrics (2006), Association for Childhood Education International (2004), and Canadian Council on Learning (2006) each of which has developed position statements on the importance of play, providing high profile documentation and commentary on the recent and rapid changes to childhood.

A complex combination of factors have changed the experience of childhood, with today’s children growing up in very different contexts as compared to their parents and grandparents. Children have less access to nature and outdoor play spaces, as families more often live in urban areas, and as diminishing natural areas themselves become protected from human impact (i.e., children at play) (Louv, 2005). In schools,
child care centres and neighbourhoods, many children have become ‘micro-managed,’ constantly supervised, and not allowed to take the simplest physical or social risks. Consequently, ‘stranger-danger’ and the fear of injury/litigation have prevented many of today’s children from experiencing time to wander, to wonder, to become socialized in what renown play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith calls the “tribe of childhood” (Honoré, 2008; Sutton-Smith as cited by Nabhan & Trimble, 1994, p. 9).

Stress combined with a lack of childhood essentials – that is, unstructured play, direct encounters with nature, hands-on activities, and the arts - are considered to be contributing to the “new morbidities” of childhood (Alliance for Childhood, 2004; Elkind, 1998, p. 201). Rather than the communicable diseases of the past (old morbidity), today’s children suffer from social and mental health concerns including increasing incidence of autism, childhood obesity, sexualisation, ADHD, and medicated childhoods (Alliance for Childhood, 2004, p. 53; American Psychological Association, 2007; Cameron, 2006). Parents and grandparents, raising families in the context of pervading digital technologies and consumer marketing, find screen time – television, DVDs, computers, videogames, cell phone texting, Internet, electronic learning systems – competing for family time, resources, and replacing physical activity (Bezaire, 2000; Kaiser Foundation, 2005).

We experience the ‘shifts’ in teaching paradigms and curricular expectations, we see deserted playgrounds and empty suburban neighbourhoods, we hear and experience our own parental dilemmas as the ‘fear factor’ and ‘screen time’ transform our family lives. Documented in recent films Where do the Children Play (White and Cook, 2007) and Lost Adventures of Childhood (Harper, 2009), the lack of unstructured, freeplay activity is considered to pose threats to children’s present and future creativity, literacy, social competence, and mental health.

For young children in a school context, specifically, demanding school curriculum, formalized expectations and standardized testing can be seen to have affected children’s experiences, even in Kindergarten classrooms. While this earliest introduction to school has been traditionally associated with scenes of play, the arts, and social learning, an increasing emphasis on early academics and ‘readiness’ has pushed play to
the margins. Vivian Paley (2005), award-winning Kindergarten educator and writer, observes:

 somehow there was still an acceptable balance, in the seventies and eighties, between the teacher’s illusions and those of the children, especially since no one demanded proof that we were getting a head start on reading and writing. We saw that the children were learning to play more effectively and that play, along with stories, music, dance, and art, provided the meaning and metaphor that flowed from one activity to the others. But the symbols of ‘real’ work were competing with the children’s art for wall space and the alphabet-as-art was being posted prominently. (p. 30-31)

 Canadian experts suggest we look to Scandinavian models of early childhood education, where daycare and preschool are viewed as a right of the child. Early learning is egalitarian and extends to the age of 7, focusing on play, holistic learning, socializing – in short, offering rich and enjoyable experiences (Jimenez, June 19, 2009; OECTA, 2008). Rather, Canadian systems may be more likely to reflect American models of education where recent studies conclude that “time for play in most public kindergartens has dwindled to the vanishing point, replaced by lengthy lessons and standardized testing” (Alliance for Childhood, 2009, p. 2). In response, leading American pediatric and early education experts call for “a thorough reassessment of our kindergarten policies and practices” (p. 5).

 Likewise, research from the United Kingdom calls for consideration of a new ‘pedagogy of play.’ Sue Rogers’ (2005) examination of pretend play in British kindergarten classrooms found that, while children and adults value highly the learning potential of pretend play, providing adequate play opportunities is problematic and classrooms are not meeting the developmental and learning needs of young children, particularly boys. Rogers found that children’s level of engagement in pretend play, and thus its potential for early learning, is “dependent on a range of external structural and managerial factors” (p. 26). These structures and factors limit pretend play, and tensions were observed between children and educators, relating to:

 1) the pressure to prepare children for the next level of schooling;
 2) lack of good quality outdoor play facilities;
 3) over-prescription of role-play areas, and;
 4) a ‘poverty of space.’ (p. 26)
Although teachers recognized and highly valued role play as an activity integral to learning and development, they were compelled to limit and interrupt sustained role play within their classrooms.

A reconsideration and reconceptualization of the place of play is called for! Is play a perk? A peril? A privilege? Is it truly a fundamental right and aspect of human life, as outlined in Article 31.1 of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)? And, if so, how do we ensure this essential childhood experience?

**Personal Roots**

May I invite you to close your eyes, and take a step back in time? Imagine your childhood play memories…were you in the city, town or country? What were your favourite toys? Did you make believe? Did you have real or imaginary props? Did you have imaginary friends? Who did you play with and when did you play alone? Did you have a playroom or a secret outdoor play place? What are your most memorable playtimes, and how might those experiences inform who you were and are – yesterday, today and tomorrow?

**Childhood Reflections**

My five-year old fingers arranged shards of brick into small, square-shaped boxes – little houses for my friends, ‘the elves,’ who were traveling from their jobs of digging up treasure in far away mountains. The backfield of my young parents’ new home – a flat mud field with scraps of brick and wood - provided my playspace and props. This is Southern Ontario farmland – terrain as flat as a pancake (I wouldn’t see a ‘real’ mountain for another 17 years) yet I believed in and envisioned this fairytale mountain and my troop of friends, as I looked at the horizon. “Hi-ho! Hi-ho!” I sang, hurrying to build their village, as they’d be arriving soon. My schoolmate, Michael, would also soon arrive, and I would tell him what had happened so far, inviting him to join in this play plan – to join in the storying, building, singing and make believe.

When my oldest brother was five, his Kindergarten report cards notes, his favourite classroom play and learning happened in the sandplay centre. Miss Monforton, who introduced each of us in turn to the world of school, reminded him regularly that the sand came from our father’s tree farm nursery. My brother, who even now could be described as quiet and perhaps introverted, would smile silently in delight,
acknowledging a feeling of belonging and connection to his kindergarten community. Our youngest brother, Brian, seldom found school an easy fit – we know now, from the work of Howard Gardner (1997), that Bri displayed high levels of ‘environmental intelligence’ from his earliest ages. He was highly attuned with and would react to his surroundings, and could sometimes be viewed as ‘impulsive’ rather than observant. Our mother relates, “Brian always preferred wandering in the marsh, to sitting in the schoolroom. Still, we got him through!” As a five-year-old, Brian turned his backyard play pool into a home for the frogs and turtles he collected in the surrounding fields and riverside; when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he replied most seriously, “A duck.”¹ Today, a graduate of a university environmental science program, Brian is employed as a ‘Streams Specialist’ for the City of Ottawa, leading community projects in measuring stream health and fish populations – the closest one can be to ‘a duck’ and he gets paid for it! Reflecting on a most enjoyable and educative afternoon spent in the company of my younger brother, I connect the impact of his early learning experiences and recognition of his personal strengths to his lifelong learning.

While touring a 2002 Tom Thompson art exhibit at the Canadian National Gallery – seeing the artistic process through Brian’s eyes, I came to better understand one of Canada’s most celebrated painters – Brian, who also paints, understood the sensibility, perspective and expression of this avid outdoorsman, who paddled and painted some of the most beautiful Canadian landscapes, known to leave his palette and paintbrush aside until ‘the fish weren’t biting.’ What do these experiences – common in a certain era of middle-class childhood - tell us about children’s play interests and intelligences? What are your childhood stories, and how might they inform how we set priorities and create curriculum for young children? Whose stories have we not yet heard? What stories might today’s children be telling in years to come?

*Play and Literacy: Rooted in Theory and Experience*

*Awe and wonder should be the first goals of education.* Michael Lerner (2000, p. 243)

¹ Children’s voices, phrases, and oral language are printed in ‘Chalkboard’ font, with the intention of offering an artful visual cue.
In fields of philosophy and education, play and make believe have long been positively associated with life and learning in childhood. Developmental theorists connect children’s play to growth and learning, and its place has been considered ensured within the field of early childhood curriculum (Bowman, 1993). My two decades as an Early Childhood Educator reflect these philosophies, as I have taught in Kindergarten, Junior Kindergarten, preschool and childcare where curriculum was allowed to emerge from children’s interests – where extended periods of freeplay, outdoor play, socialization, and the creative arts were assumed to provide the foundations for quality care and education. Tickle trunks full of dress-up clothes, baskets of pretend play props and oral storytelling, open-ended craft materials, cherished songs, fingerplays, poems, puppets, and picture books – these were my most cherished teaching tools, along with a heartfelt concern and curiosity regarding children’s developmental needs, strengths, and interests. I was interested in parents – but mostly for what I could learn from them about their children. I relished my role as a professional “kid-watcher” (Goodman, 1978).

However curious I might have been, teaching and learning ‘how to read and write’ were thought to be the purview of Grade 1 and 2 teachers. A romanticized view of early childhood, as a time for the ‘developing child’ to be allowed to unfold ‘naturally’, highly influenced my generation of educators (Cameron, Bartel & Bezaire, 2006). We were likely to take a ‘hands-off’ approach, offering children rich learning materials, as well as ample time and space – but, eschewing direct teaching methods, or explicit literacy instruction (reading aloud didn’t count?).

Emergent literacy research opened up a whole new perspective, conceptualizing the process of ‘literacy development’ within a continuum – an exciting and recognizable connection for those of us with a background in developmental psychology. With “literacy-like behaviours” viewed as “legitimate and contributory” (Roskos & Christie, 2001, p. 60), our storytimes, craft tables, and dramatic play centres seemed validated. Still, delving into the ‘mechanics’ of reading and writing seemed ‘developmentally inappropriate’, and I would agree with Roskos and Christie (2001) that “the benefits of play for literacy acquisition are [were] not well articulated and understood” (p. 60). What were the internal mental processes involved in reading and writing? How could adults
best support those processes through the play environment and in the context of direct teaching? What constituted a ‘balanced’ approach to literacy?

David Booth (2008) reminds us that “we teachers cling to what we know… We do not escape the contemporary world by hiding inside our brick buildings, but sometimes our curricula do, along with our resources. Schools as repositories for old books, old memories” (p. 19). While many young children have a TV on most of the day, and an electronic learning system in their toy box, many Early Childhood Educators still pride themselves on having ‘battery-free’ classrooms. There is commonly a disconnect between the advice we would offer (press upon) parents, when wearing our ‘teacher hat,’ as compared to our own ‘family literacy’/play/home environments, particularly when it comes to new literacies (Cook, 2005a).

My Masters and Doctoral studies and experience as a mother have provided the roots of inquiry and sources of new understanding which have prompted and informed this study. Literacy and language research has been most provocative and challenging, disrupting my conceptualization of text and literacy practice (Booth, 2008; Harste, 2003); coming to recognize multiliteracies, visual-text literacies and digital literacies (Carrington, 2004; Kress, 1998; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; New London Group, 1996); to consider how literacy practices are socially-situated, and occur within a socio-political context (Street, 1995; Vasquez, 2004), and; questioning my reliance on ‘ages and stages’ theory of development, viewing children as competent meaning-makers and agents of learning (Canella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Wells, 1986).

Works from the field of ‘mother research’ has also inspired my reflective practice as a developing researcher informing this study’s research questions and methodological perspective, as well as prompting engagement in critical analysis and interrogation of my theoretical assumptions (Schon, 1983, 1987; Woolley, 2000). Within the context of an ongoing ‘mother research’ project, I have documented and analyzed the literacy development of my young son within our home literacy-play environment, experimenting with and honing data collection methods, and considering various analytical frameworks. This ongoing documentation, begun in the winter semester of 2006, has included digital photography of my son at play, field notes (e.g., documenting his multimodal reader
responses during read aloud and/or shared reading, his narrative and wordplay during make believe), and collection of literacy and play artifacts, such as writing samples, drawings, collages and photographs of his block play constructions, as well as considering the multiple ways that digital literacies and technology have impacted our home. Though ‘mother research’ was not used as methodology in the actual thesis research, it contextualized my study.

While documenting Michel, my son’s, playful reader responses and storying, Luke and Freebody’s Four Resources Model (1999) particularly challenged and complicated my understanding of his emergent literacy and meaning making. Observing Michel’s ‘everyday’ literacy practices and coming to recognize his competencies as “code breaker,” “meaning maker,” “text user,” and “text critic”, my view of literacy as a simple print-based/school-based activity was disrupted (Luke & Freebody, 1999, p. 1). This model conceptualized literacy as a “repertoire of practices” or “repertoires of capability” which are integrated and “variously mixed and variously orchestrated” for effective reading and writing (p. 5). I came to understand that literacy practices work interdependently, rather than as discrete skill sets, as Michel connected story narrative to his own background knowledge, as well as to multiple texts (e.g., “The wolf is really like Scrooge!” he observed while we read The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig by Eugene Trivizas). I documented Michel’s interest in graphic and visual texts, noted how he predicted text orally and gesturally, and how he recreated and revisited themes of interest (e.g., fear/bravery, risk-taking) constructing multimodal and visual texts (Bezaire & Ghafouri, 2007; Bezaire & Ghafouri, 2008). Thus, my conceptualizations of literacy were ‘opened up’, particularly as I was positioned to observe Michel so intimately throughout his ‘early years.’ As parallel to my thesis study, engagement in the work of mother research has driven my inquiry processes in powerful ways, and impacted my understanding of the conceptual framework that underlies this thesis.
Figure 1: What meaning and learning does a child derive from play experience? How might he view himself, and his environment? What qualities make this a memorable experience for him, and how might that ‘play out’ in the years to come?

Further Inspirations and Provocations

The conceptualization and design of this study has also been informed and provoked by David Elkind (2003), who accuses parents, educators and developmental theorists of viewing play from a mainly “adult-functional” standpoint, considering the value of children’s play in terms of the developmental and educational benefits it offers - in how play serves learning (p. 46). While Elkind acknowledges the significant developmental and educational value of play, he cautions us to consider play from a “child-experiential” viewpoint, which emphasizes fun, free choice, and enjoyment.
Associated with positive emotions, and providing memorable experiences of enjoyment and engagement, true play offers “a personal, experiential value of equal, if not greater, importance” as compared to its contribution to development and learning (p. 50). A positivist perspective is reflected in current educational emphasis on early academic achievement, standardized results, diminishing opportunities for children to play, and all sorts of pressure put on the opportunities which they do have for play; could it be that we are not seeing the forest for the trees regarding play’s essential contribution to school experience? Elkind warns that when play is relegated for the purposes of academic instruction, children miss opportunities to experience its full and true enjoyment. Roskos and Christie (2001) contend that “the benefits of play for literacy acquisition are not well articulated and understood, which makes it increasingly difficult for educators to defend play as an opportunity for literacy experience and learning” (p. 60).

Indeed, while doing fieldwork and observation in conceptualizing this study, I was surprised to find that even in some of the most reputable public schools – those recommended by colleagues in the school system and by university teacher educators - current conditions for teaching and learning have pushed play to the edges of the daily routine. During observation days in these classrooms, I noted that freeplay time was limited and truncated as children’s routines involved transitions to computer labs, small-group math and literacy times, music and art lessons – all worthwhile activities but generally teacher-led and outcome-based. I realized that a study of play in these settings would be a ‘study of interruptions,’ and while it may be interesting and compelling to document the ways in which today’s teachers and children are resisting current ‘accountability pressures,’ and fitting play into the cracks of their school day, this was not where my heart led me in this inquiry. Rather, my aim has been to offer a holistic account, a rich and textured description and interpretation of the power and potential of ‘school play.’

Also, I have been inspired by my committee members/mentors, Linda Cameron and David Booth, as well as the writings of Vivian Paley and Jane Katch, whose work is so grounded in the everyday lives of children, families and teachers, and accessible to teachers in the field. I have written with a teacher audience in mind, aiming for the writing to be articulate, clear and enjoyable to read and view.
As timing would have it, this thesis will be amongst the first batch required by the University of Toronto to enter as an "e-thesis", rather than a bound volume found on a university library bookshelf. I am excited by the opportunities afforded by this use of online space, the potential reach and accessibility of an academic virtual database, and this opportunity to push the boundaries and limits of a thesis document in ways that match the theoretical framework of the thesis. Recognizing multimodality and multimedia as legitimate meaning making and text, I have carefully interpreted and edited digital photography and video, embedding digital/visual texts within the thesis document; visual text provides much content and framework for this thesis. I have developed such new appreciations of the possibilities offered by digital tools, and hope that this thesis will contribute to others’ appreciation and understanding of the power of multimodal text, and its potential in considering and making visible the many languages of children.
Who is playing in our part of the playground?: Conceptualizations and Play Theory

Play is considered to be a fundamental right and aspect of human life. The United Nations, recognizing a universal need for play, as outlined in Article 31.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that “Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (p. 9). While play is considered a universal human activity, conceptions of play are varied and influenced by a whole range of complex variables such as era, culture, function, context, and theoretical perspective (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The subject of play is a topic of study for an array of disciplines, ranging from education to communication studies, biology to philosophy, with many different perspectives on its aspects and importance (Goncu & Perone, 2005a; Mayfield, 2001).

Play is considered an intricate, multidimensional phenomenon, easy to recognize and yet difficult to circumscribe in an operational definition (Fein, 1981; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Turnbull & Jenvey, 2006). In attempts to address this difficulty, researchers have developed observational criteria that characterize play behaviour. Though still a contentious issue within and among various fields of study, commonly accepted characteristics include:

1) nonliteral behaviour;
2) “means over ends disposition”;
3) positive affect;
4) flexible;
5) voluntary, and;
6) having internal control. (Association for Childhood Education International, 2002; Christie, 1991; Mayfield, 2001; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p. 51; Ruben, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983)

However, creating an operational definition based on this criteria proves to be challenging. Smith and Vollstedt (1985) examined the use of common criteria in an empirical study of play observation and identification, finding that some commonly-accepted criteria were not actually helpful when in an observational context. Though
adults often considered play to be “intrinsically motivated” and focused on the means rather than the end product, children were observed to sometimes have a clear goal and to be outwardly motivated when playing with other children; the criteria did not match all circumstances. Rather, play was generally and most easily recognized when children were engaged in “non-literal” (i.e., pretending) behaviour, characterized by “positive affect” and “flexibility”. That is, play was observationally defined as “being enjoyable, flexible, and most typically characterized by pretend” (p. 1049). With respect to planning research, Smith and Vollstedt conclude that “it is easier to select criteria that definitely imply a judgement of play (but exclude many other quite playful episodes) than to draw up inclusive criteria for all playful episodes” (p. 1049).

The question of control – internal and external – is an interesting criteria, and presents dilemmas when observing classroom ‘play’ in which adults are often involved or mediating. Seemingly, if children are in control (rather than adults), then an activity seems to be considered ‘play.’

Much social play is motivated more by a desire to be accepted by the other children than by any especial desire for freedom of play choice. Furthermore, it is the very obligational aspects of play (the routines and the rules) that makes it so difficult for maladjusted children to either master the play performances or be accepted by their peers. Clearly, play is itself a compound of voluntary and involuntary elements, not totally one or the other. (Sutton-Smith, 1999, p. 241)

Considering these dilemmas, determining identifying characteristics of play, and aiming toward considering play experience as a whole has continually been an interesting and challenging aspect of this thesis study.

Lack of consensus and less considered textured definitions of play have proven problematic in the quest for continuous lines of inquiry and rigorous research results. Reviews of research on literacy-related play reveal that play is generally defined “very loosely” to include “any activity that occurs in a ‘play’ center or in the presence of play materials”, though experience with children in classroom play settings commonly contradict this assumption (Roskos & Christie, 2001, p. 79; Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

Some studies are notable for most strongly outlining and defining play criteria (Roskos & Christie, 2001). In an examination of the use of ‘literate language’ in sociodramatic play and other types of play activities, Vedeler (1997) defined ‘play
episodes’ as those in which “children played coherently on the same play theme or with the same toys for 10 minutes or more” (p. 156). ‘Dramatic play’ involved “play episodes in which two or more children jointly enact some kind of pretend activity” with ‘role play utterances’ – both in an assumed role and about the role – chosen as criteria for pretend play activity (p. 156-157). Likewise, Rowe (1998) examined “dramatic play events” described as “children’s evolving play scripts” in which children “adopt a nonliteral, as if stance and link their talk and actions to the evolving play world, or alternately… contribute to its construction by using metacommunication about the play” (p. 17).

Conference presentation and subsequent discussion at a session entitled “The Promise of Play” (77th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences) influenced my understanding of various definitions of play, and of how this can be operationalized within the context of this doctoral work (Bezaire, 2008). King (1979), in her examination of kindergarteners’ perspectives on play, concluded that the more dimensions under the child’s control, the more likely children would consider an activity to be play. Children’s perspectives, voice and opinions may be heard and privileged in ways that can inform researchers which particular dimensions are important within specific contexts (i.e., children define and decide what constitutes play) (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2008). Similarly, the children’s perspectives and responses in this study informed and defined which activities ‘counted’ as play.

**Pretend Play: Expression and Understanding/Emotion and Language**

Descriptions and consideration of specific types of play have informed this study, furthering my understanding of the links between make believe (i.e., pretend play, socio-dramatic play, role play), emotion, and language. During the so-called ‘preschool years,’ now increasingly spent as the first years of schooling, researchers have observed how children’s pretend play increases overall, becoming more social and complex when children are in environments “where pretend play is valued and encouraged” (Kavanaugh, 2006, p. 271). Pretend play is considered to be “a hallmark of early childhood” and an “important venue in which children practice and learn using representational media” (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993, p. 165). Though observed to decline in the school-aged period (Fein, 1981), there is some evidence to support that pretend play persists as a life-span activity (Goncu & Perone, 2005; Hart & Zellars, 2006).
Though pretend play is the most frequently studied type of play (Turnbull & Jenvey, 2006), the research data on which it rests is limited, particularly in context of early childhood classrooms. Research literature is largely based on study of Caucasian children born in Europe or North America, in laboratory settings or at home with their mothers (Kavanaugh, 2006). Further, bodies of research have traditionally focused on examination of the pretend play actions produced by children in contrived contexts, rather than children’s understanding of other people’s pretend actions in the context of collaborative and shared play themes and events (Kavanaugh, 2006, p. 271). In a shift, research studies have come to conceptualize and examine pretend play as a phenomenon involving not only ‘nonliteral’ and ‘simulative’ actions or enactment, but also the ability to understand the pretend actions of others in everyday play contexts (p. 271). This shift would indicate a recognition of meaning making, a clearer link to language and literacy research, and greater awareness of social context.

Through make believe play, children engage in imagining and acting out ‘what is’ and ‘what if,’ as Susan Engel (2005a) explains: “Both involve pretence, but one rests on plausible reconstructions of everyday lived experience, while the other rests on exploring implausible and often magical events and explanations” (p. 524). These understandings involve “double knowledge”, an awareness of the real and imagined properties of objects (McCune-Nicolich, 1981), with the pretender having an understanding of ‘reality,’ creating a mental representation or imagining something else, and then deliberately projecting this mental representation on a real situation or object, with intention and awareness (Lillard, 2001). In shared or social pretend play, these mental processes extend to the ability to comprehend and respond to the make-believe actions of others, as necessary for developing and sustaining play themes (Kavanaugh, 2006).

Reviews of pretend play research highlight the complex “social-cognitive demands…that involve an understanding of mutuality and reciprocity” when children are engaged in this seemingly natural/easy/simple childhood activity (Kavanaugh, 2006, p. 273). Role-play, a type of social/shared pretend play, is of particular interest. In role-play, children create their own dramas, creatively editing, expanding and extending their roles and themes through enactment. Role-play involves:

1) two or more people enacting complementary roles;
2) may include discussion and negotiation beforehand as to who will play which role;
3) often includes turn-taking, or switching of roles;
4) often includes actions, gestures and voice intonations that ‘befit’ the character they are portraying (Kavanaugh, 2006, p. 272-273).

This play is linked to, and may influence, children’s understanding of other people’s thoughts and emotions - mental states - their abilities to consider thoughts, feelings and ideas from multiple perspectives…to imagine a variety of possibilities. Likewise, pretend play in general, and role-play specifically, are linked to the domain of language and literacy. Considering various types or categories of play - including dramatic play, constructive play, exploratory play and practice play - dramatic play has been considered most significantly related to literacy development and learning (Christie, 1991). As explained by Jenkinson (2001):

Children’s symbolic play - a way of imaginative seeing - has been found to enhance language development. Language itself is a complex symbol system where, put very simply, one thing stands for another. A word stands in place of either an object, quality, activity, experience, and so on. In written language, the letters stand for the sounds that make up words….Language require both concepts and symbols. Make-believe relies heavily on verbalization, and symbolic players need to be more verbal to describe their play symbols to others. (p. 85)

Pretend play and literacy are thought to share underlying processes and characteristics, involving an “assimilative manipulation of symbols” (Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983, p. 700); children involved in dramatic play use “make-believe transformations of objects and role-playing to act out the scripts and stories they invent” (Christie, 1991 cited in Rowe, 1998, p. 13). Kendrick (2005), in examining play narrative or the themes and language children use when engaged in pretend play, observed “…in composing their play narratives, children reflect on, and consciously choose symbols and modes of representation that help them organize and articulate their inner thoughts” (p. 9). In early childhood, when situated in meaningful contexts, children demonstrate understanding that written language is a symbol system with linguistic meaning accessible to them for purposes of communication, enjoyment and information (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). Play offers these necessary ‘everyday’/functional
contexts, allowing children to use the full range of creative and constructive processes required for authentic literacy experience and meaning making.

Reviews of research on drama and play relate their association to academic achievement in various language and literacy learning (Podlozny, 2000; Roskos & Christie, 2001). Story understanding, reading achievement, reading readiness and writing are shown to benefit from inclusion of drama in the classroom, particularly structured enactment with the classroom leader engaged and modeling role-play (Podlozny, 2000). Further, socio-cultural examinations of play and literacy learning reveal the importance of supportive classroom contexts which include more capable play partners with shared interests (Cameron & Varma, 1997).

The Kindergarten Classroom as Play Environment: Conditions of Learning

This study focuses on the central features of the classroom as a play and literacy-learning environment. Historically, educational research has most often treated the environment as a “backdrop”, rather than focusing on how aspects of context impact cognition in significant ways (Roskos & Neuman, 2001). Ethnographic study of children’s classroom play behaviour first documented children’s “literacy-like” activity (i.e., pretending to ‘read’ and ‘write’ while role-playing), prompting a consideration of the significance of literacy opportunities within the environment (Jacobs, 1984; Roskos & Neuman, 2001). Further research study found that visual organization and “easy access to richly varied and sufficiently abundant materials” affected the quality and frequency of children’s active interaction with objects, and thus their opportunities for learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2001, p. 284). Reggio Emilia schools are considered exceptional in offering creative classroom designs which support children’s exploratory and creative play; this approach has been found to highlight the role of the learning environment, characterizing it as “the third teacher” (Danko-McGhee, & Slutsky, 2003, p. 13). For example, using natural, recyclable, and purchased materials, Reggio teachers display and organize the classroom to bring about interest, activity, and thought – objects and organization are considered communicative. Likewise, literacy skills in language and print awareness are considered to be enhanced when objects are “clustered together to create a schema - or meaning network”; play, discussion, and associated print resources
“provide a semantic network of connected, well-organized, and in-depth information, which facilitates and supports literacy learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2001, p. 284).

Key criteria for ‘literacy objects’ include ‘authenticity,’ that is playthings which are real, known objects that reflect children’s everyday life experiences and real-world environments such as actual grocery packaging, message boards, notepads, pens, pencils, calendars, telephone books, or play money (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Building upon children’s background knowledge, authentic play-literacy contexts are considered most conducive to complex problem-solving, social interaction and engagement. Thus literacy objects provide greater opportunities for practicing and enhancing language and literacy skills and understanding; children’s literacy practices increase, becoming more complex and masterful, and are associated with a greater repertoire of language and literacy behaviours (Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Vukelich, 1991, 1994). Literacy-rich play centres have been shown to provide a “very effective instructional strategy” (Roskos & Christie, 2001, p. 63).

An examination of the classroom environment as a context for play and learning includes consideration of social context, as well as physical arrangement and material objects: “It is the interaction between context and interaction among people that creates opportunities (and unfortunately, in some cases, constraints) for learning” (Roskos & Neuman, 2001, p. 287). Context is influenced not only by the physical setting, but the routines and regular interactions engaged in within that setting, as well as the experience, assumptions, and values that participants bring to those interactions. An ‘ecological’ view of classroom learning considers the dynamic between person and environment, offering a more complex view of interaction within the context of various spheres of influence. Children intentionally act on and shape their environments, while also being influenced by their environment at various levels – the immediate surroundings, ‘near’ or ‘micro’ level, as well as social influences, ‘far’ or ‘macro’ level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, our understanding of learning is expanded, as not resting solely within the individual, but extended to consider the interplay between individual and environment.

As relating to play-literacy research, Roskos and Neuman (2001) characterized most study as “centrist”, examining play-literacy processes at the micro level within the immediate surroundings amongst individuals (p. 74). Rogers (2005) provided an
exception to this research tradition. In examining organizational and pedagogical features of classroom practices that impact on role play in reception (3-5 year olds) classes in Great Britain, she revealed tensions between boys and their educators prompted by micro-level conditions (i.e., physical space, routine, teacher practices) and macro-level conditions (i.e., social norms, standardized curricular expectations, systemic policies and conceptualization of program goals). In this study, I have aimed to explore the as yet largely “uncharted…boundaries of play and literacy” by considering how boys actively shape and engage in their surroundings, while considering the impact of the “larger environmental spheres with physical, social and cultural properties” which impact this interaction (Roskos & Neuman, 2001, p. 74).

A significant cultural sphere, and its related body of research, which informed my study is that of the impact of global consumer culture and media on the lives of children, particular in relation to toys as ‘text.’ As children’s lives are increasingly characterized by electronic media and consumer consumption, researchers are establishing expanded notions of ‘text’ and ‘literacy objects.’ While past research has focused on print-based literacy, participation in post-industrial societies now demand literacy skills that are “increasingly multi-modal, complex and intertextual” (Carrington, 2003, p. 84). As Kress (1997) explains:

The communicational landscapes of today, their relation to current forms of work and to current forms of pleasure, demand a recasting of our thinking about representation in the most far-reaching form. The world, now, is no longer a world in which written language is dominant. (p. 5)

Today’s children are recipients of a myriad of messages and images communicated through technological, multi-sensory and material means (e.g., video games, toys, film, internet, television, DVD). The processes of engagement with these media are considered pedagogic in nature, as ‘reading’ of these ‘texts’ instruct children on a range of issues, intersecting ideas about identity, consumerism and social status, as well as an approach to literacy that is considered very different as compared to previous generations (Carrington, 2003; Carrington, 2004). A key feature is the degree to which these media engage children, designed by companies to maintain children’s attention, thereby improving marketability (Kaiser Foundation, 2005). Another aspect, sometimes
‘missed’ by adults, for whom the products are not directed, is the extent to which children’s media intersect with various other ‘texts.’ Carrington (2003) explains:

One of the key pedagogic features of consumer texts made for children is that they are rarely stand-alone. This is what makes them so pedagogically powerful. The seemingly harmless gendered message of one small doll is also delivered by websites, affiliated clothing ranges, advertising and by other such ‘texts.’ Consumer texts are characteristically intertextual… (p. 93)

Dyson (2003) in a study of children’s play and literacy within the classroom, considered the means and meanings that popular culture images and personas hold for young children:

Popular images appeal, in part, for precisely the same reason they disconcert: they feature dominant desires and pleasures about, for example, power, wealth, and beauty, which themselves reflect interrelated societal constructions like age, gender, race and class. Using such texts is a way in which children can imagine themselves older and hipper; that is, those texts are toys for a kind of dress-up play….sports shows also offered material for imagining glamorous futures, particularly (but not exclusively) for boys. (pp. 28-29)

Therefore, for the purposes of my study, children’s media (i.e., popular culture and playthings) are not viewed as “merely a neutral giver of pleasure to small children”, but “distinct cultural and material artifact(s), representing current themes in mass culture”, including “prevailing views about gender and childhood” (Sutton-Smith, 1986; Carrington, 2003, p. 92).

The Study of Play and Literacy Connections

The link between play and literacy – those times when fully engaged in fun, self-directed, non-literal (i.e., imaginary) activity, children are also developing understandings, meanings and skills which relate or contribute to reading and writing abilities – is an idea first proposed by Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978). The use of symbols is considered to be a key aspect connecting play to literacy. When a child uses objects or situations to signify or represent something other than what they are (e.g., a doll signifying a baby…a banana a telephone…a park bench a ‘doctor’s office’), then s/he is practicing/developing (Piaget) and/or learning (Vygotsky) cognitive abilities in transformation and abstract thinking which are foundational to the use of symbols and skills required for literacy (i.e., letters representing sounds, words representing meanings
and ideas). Pretense or symbolic play and literacy, as well as other ‘aspects of cognition,’ share underlying principles and mechanisms relating to brain functioning (Lillard, 1993; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Podlozny, 2000): play and literacy share a common domain.

Wolfgang (1974), using a Piagetian theoretical framework, first examined this relationship, prompting study through the 1980s, similarly framed (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). Early studies also commonly measured/defined literacy based on standardized measures of achievement in literacy, most often centred on independent decoding in reading, and measured outside of a play context (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Rowe, 1998). Reflecting Piagetian conceptualizations of learning as an individual, maturational process, symbolic play and literacy were linked to measurable, linear progress of individuals within uniform developmental domains.

In contrast, the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) introduced socio-cultural theory, which challenged individually focused stage theory, emphasizing the influence of social context on mental functioning and learning, particularly when mental processes are modelled by more competent others (i.e., peers or, more often, adults). Considering literacy development, through the lens of socio-cultural theory, children are viewed as active “meaning makers”, developing foundational knowledge and understanding through everyday social interaction (Wells, 1986). Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) offered foundational work in transactional early literacy research, documenting and considering young children’s interpretations, approximations and appropriations of print and nonprint messages, emerging in playful ways from the context of their everyday lives. From this ‘emergent literacy’ perspective the conceptualization of literacy development extended to include “budding literacy-like behaviors (e.g., pretend reading) as legitimate and contributory, treating social contexts (e.g., bedtime reading) as important venues for exposing children to literacy knowledge and practices” (Roskos & Christie, 2001, p. 60; Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Through this lens, the play-literacy connection takes on added importance, as play provides opportunities for children to use language in ‘literate ways’ and use literacy practices as witnessed in everyday life (Roskos & Christie, 2001; Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

Rowe (1998) identifies four key areas in a review of the research on the connection between play and emergent literacy development. First, children have been
observed to assume “literate roles”, pretending to be reading and writing, considered to contribute to a learner’s knowledge of the purposes of print (Hall, 1987; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1991; Vukelich, 1991). Second, researchers in educational psychology have explored correlations between aspects of pretend play and particular measures of emergent literacy, with reading ability (i.e., code-breaking) shown to be predicted by children’s use of metalinguistic verbs (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Rowe, 1998, p. 14). Third, examinations of adult and peer involvement in pretend play revealed that social elements of play are positively related to a range of literacy skills, including print knowledge, emergent story reading and story recall (Christie, 1991; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Rowe, 1998). A fourth stream of research attempts to move beyond adult “hypotheses and perspectives” relating to play-literacy, to consider children’s spontaneous uses for book-related play (Rowe, 1998, p. 15). The latter group of observational studies offer rich, descriptive accounts which have revealed possible social and cognitive uses of play not previously recognized in experimental research studies. As well as serving a variety of social purposes, “the multisensory nature of play allowed (children) to move past the limitations of language to explore their hypotheses and interpretations through gesture, pantomime, costumes, and props (p. 15). This diverse study of play and literacy has offered many perspectives from which to consider the formulation and implementation of this study, and offered a dynamic research foundation on which to ground this work.

**Multiliteracies Theory**

In the 21st century, having entered into an era where information is highly technological and visual, the field of literacy education has moved beyond traditional conceptualizations of reading and writing – to embrace and explore the concept of multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, Kress, 1997; Pahl, 1999). These pedagogical perspectives centre on the recognition of a “burgeoning variety of text forms,” particularly in the context of rapidly changing technologies and globalization, emphasizing that literacy learning can no longer be focused on a single, standardized mode of communication – namely, formal written English (New London Group, 1996, pp. 61-63). As Booth (2006) explains:
Print itself does not hold prominence over visuals, or combinations of both. While the literacy inherent in each mode involves compositions, decoding comprehension, and response, changes in how text forms function will alter or expand our definition of literacy. Think of the multimedia in a website: as the mouse clicks, meaning-bearing icons, animations, and video clips may appear, along with graphics of all types, pop-ups, an entire sign system dependent upon the “reader’s” tool kit. Isn’t it paradoxical that as we invent universal symbol systems, we also find a growing diversity of cultures and languages with all the nations and groups involved? We will need to help readers develop multiple perspectives if they are to successfully communicate in their wide-ranging, plugged-in world (p. 13).

Likewise, the study of New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), focusing on the huge growth in electronic texts and technological modes of communication, also explores changes in 21st century economies and institutions and has informed broader understandings of literacy (Rowsell, Kosnik & Beck, 2008, p. 111; Jewitt, 2008). Still, I have chosen to centre this work within the field of multiliteracies, as these perspectives focus more centrally on pedagogy and offer an “emphasis on continuity as well as newness”… “of multiliteracies pedagogy ‘supplementing’ (rather than replacing) traditional literacy pedagogy” (p. 111). Thus, multiliteracies theory seems to offer a most interesting and useful lens through which to consider literacy and play within a school (i.e., kindergarten) context, where traditional conceptualizations of literacy (and play!) tend to prevail.

While multiliteracies theory is often associated with electronic and digital modes of communication, many types of “literacy variation” are considered within multiliteracies discourse, including “home or local literacy”; “informal, colloquial, vernacular, and conversational language”; “graphic, projected, spoken, or enacted communication”, other subjects such as “mathematics, science, history, geography, etc.”; and, “regional, aboriginal, immigrant, and foreign languages” (Rowsell, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008, p. 110). This broadened understanding of literacy includes ongoing, multiple discourse and recognizes many types of expression and communication as literacies – “formal or informal; spoken, gestured, written, or graphic; official or unofficial; correct or ‘incorrect’” (p. 112). Indeed, the power and place of a pedagogy of multiliteracies is based on equity and utility, recognizing the diversity of language forms represented and present in today’s schools, homes and communities – and mindful of the tension created
by the pressure to equip children in a changing world in which future technologies and electronic communication modes seem nearly impossible to anticipate.

*Why Boys?*

Looking at the process of how boys come to mean through classroom play potentially offers a lens through which to consider the significance of play experience in relation to literacy learning, not simply in terms of standardized academic achievement or even broader conceptualizations of literacy skills, but in relation to how children may construct social identity and understandings of themselves as learners. Research offers significant indicators that boys’ experiences, while not entirely generalizable, do offer an interesting perspective from which to view the role of fun, fully engaged, personally and socially meaningful activity in the learning process. Considering the difficulties many boys exhibit in later years within the school system, an examination of the processes with which boys come to mean, through classroom play, will add to the consideration of how to best support some boys’ (and girls’) literacy learning and practices. Charles Pascal (2009), in his recent report on Full-day learning for kindergarteners, asserted: “Too many boys are struggling – Differences between how girls and boys fare are grounded in complex interplay of biological, social, and cultural factors. We need to pay more attention to understanding these complexities to inform programming, staffing, and training” (p. 26). We are cautioned that, while gender offers a compelling lens through which to consider teaching and learning, a simplified consideration of its role only serves to essentialize and limit, rather than clarify how to better support learners in all their diversity.

Boys’ achievement in literacy learning, their attitudes toward reading and their equitable participation in elementary, secondary and higher education has increasingly become a cause for concern and attention in the field of education. As educational researchers focus on gender issues in education, differences in boys’ educational attainments, in general, and literacy achievement, in particular, have shed light on boys’ educational experiences.

- An increasing volume of evidence indicates that gender is a significant factor in both choice of reading materials and reading achievement for boys and girls.
• Boys typically score lower than girls on standardized tests in the language arts.
• Boys are more likely than girls to be placed in special education programs.
• Boys are less likely than girls to go to university.
• Dropout rates are higher for boys than for girls.

( Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 4)

Educational research indicates that boys not only have particular reading preferences, which differ from the reading materials most commonly available and used in schools, but boys also engage in unique literacy practices which are neither recognized nor assessed in common school curriculum (Booth, 2002; Blair & Sanford, 2003a). As a more complete picture and understanding of boys’ unique learning needs are developed, policy-makers and educators are working to respond. In Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005) has offered new guidelines and has linked these with funded, school-based ‘Teacher Inquiry’ projects, aiming to promote key strategies viewed as essential to improving boys’ literacy skills and school achievement.

In her study of kindergarten classrooms and play-based learning, Rogers (2005) observes that issues of space and noise level are particularly problematic with regards to making provisions for boys’ pretend play. Rogers recommends more innovative approaches to the use of indoor play space, and development of outdoor play space with an aim to improve the quality of play in kindergartens, particularly for boys. However, while making the most of classroom space and offering more outdoor time may go some way in practically addressing children’s play needs, these sorts of recommendations do not address larger, systemic issues relating to how boys’ literacy practices are recognized (or not) within schooling contexts. Recent research suggests that school-age and adolescent boys typically “use literacies to shape their identities and develop shared interests with friends”; these practices are often expressed in socially prescribed ways such as “loud, witty/mocking, individualistic, [and] self-fulfilling” (Blair & Sanford, 2003b). Teacher and children’s book author, Jon Scieszka (2003) emphasizes the importance of offering young male readers book choice, role-models and a ‘like-minded’ learning community, in an attempt to not only support boys’ school achievement, but challenge social values and gender roles.
Sadker and Sadker (2002) describe the ‘miseducation’ of boys: “They grow up learning lines and practicing moves from a time-worn script: Be cool, don’t show emotion, repress feelings, be aggressive, compete and win” (p. 194). These narrow, prescribed social roles are associated with a range of academic and social problems, including learning difficulties, substance abuse and risk-taking behaviour (p. 195). Gallas (1998) contends that when boys assume narrowly defined masculine personae within the classroom, they may gain status and authority but “also disrupt instruction, intimidate classmates, and force a code of detachment on themselves that denies their potential as learners and thinkers” (p. 35). In the context of today’s ‘push down’ academic curriculum, accelerated performance standards, and an overall ‘hurriedness’ in the social contexts of childhood, how might boys be exploring and constructing their identities as players, meaning makers, and emergent reader-writers?

What is the Role of Play in Curriculum?

Curriculum is an explicitly and implicitly intentional set of interactions designed to facilitate learning and development and to impose meaning on experience. The explicit intentions usually are expressed in the written curricula and in courses of study; the implicit intentions are found in the “hidden curriculum”, by which we mean the roles and norms that underlie interactions in the school. (Miller & Seller, 1992, p. 3-4)

This study is situated within a ‘transactional’ or ‘constructivist’ theoretical framework, reflecting these significant influences on teaching philosophy and the creation of positive learning environments. While a ‘transmission’ or ‘traditional’ orientation toward curriculum would view knowledge as static and position learners as passive recipients, a transactional view looks on education as an active engagement - “a dialogue between the student and the curriculum in which the student reconstructs knowledge through the dialogue process” (Miller & Seller, 1990, p. 6). Founded on John Dewey’s educational philosophy, the transactional position emphasizes problem-solving within a democratic social context, thus offering a theoretical base for inquiry approaches to curriculum (p. 62). Construction of knowledge and understanding is based on active engagement and experience, judged in quality by its “agreeableness” and the extent to which it “lives on” and supports subsequent experience and learning (Dewey, 1938/1997, pp. 27-28). “In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of
growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience.” (p. 47). Viewed from this perspective, classroom learning is characterized by cooperative social interaction where students and teachers work collaboratively to solve problems that are personally meaningful and relevant.

Similarly, the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky place “action and self-directed problem-solving at the heart of learning and development (Wood, 1998, p. 5). Influential in the field of educational psychology, their constructivist theories maintain that abstract thinking evolves out of “material actions…grounded in practical problem-solving” (pp. 9-10). A Piagetian perspective places emphasis on an individual child’s active exploration of the material world, viewing learning largely as a natural process of development and maturation. With a focus on problem-solving processes and cognitive operations, Piaget contributed greatly to curriculum theory by shifting from a focus on product to the processes of learning. Though hugely influential within the field of education in general, and that of educational psychology and early childhood education in particular, Piagetian perspectives are criticized for offering a distorted view of learning which essentializes childhood experience by emphasizing universal stages and linear progression, and precludes consideration of children’s learning within various social contexts (Canella, 1997; Engel, 2005b).

In contrast, Vygotsky expands constructivist concepts to include language and active mental processes as influenced by the social and cultural environment and so, from this perspective, the role of teaching and instruction is at the centre of learning (Wood, 1998, p. 11; Follari, 2007, p. 54). Piaget views development as largely maturational, manifesting itself within an individual child through unassisted activity – interaction with objects. In contrast, Vygotsky asserts, “the capacity to learn through instruction is itself a fundamental feature of human intelligence” (Wood, 1998, p. 26). Piaget views language more simply as an “output of thought”, while Vygotsky conceptualizes language as a generator of learning and understanding (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 65). When a child interacts with a system of symbols (e.g., language, visuals, media) this offers not simply ‘content’ for thinking but has a “dynamic, structuring effect on learning and development”; learning language provides “ways of construing and constructing the world” (Wood, 1998, p. 17).
Relating to his theory of the ‘zone of proximal development,’ Vygotskian theory offers two important perspectives on the role of play in learning. First, he highlights the social aspects of learning, placing importance on the gap between what a child is able to do independently, and what s/he can do within the social context of more capable others – adults or peers. Children’s potential for learning is “revealed and indeed is often realized in interactions with more knowledgeable others” (Wood, 1998, p. 26). Play, particularly socio-dramatic play, provides social contexts for learning as children assume different points of view, problem-solve, and develop language through “complex social exchange” (Roskos & Christie, 2001, p. 74). Second, Vygotsky viewed play as a zone of proximal development, arguing that play activity “enables children to achieve higher levels of cognitive functioning” (p. 80). Play contexts provide unique conditions, where children are able to most optimally take risks, interpret feedback and problem-solve (i.e., adjust or correct mistakes); “In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky, 1976 as cited by Roskos & Christie, 2001). Bruner, influenced by Vygotsky, considered play contexts to offer conditions for learning where children are best able to regulate and organize their thought, action and problem-solving, at these times achieving higher levels of performance (Wood, 1998; Roskos & Christie, 2001, p. 80).

Both Piaget and Vygotsky recognized pretend play as characteristic of early childhood and an “important venue” in which children can use “representational media”; however, their stance toward the role and function of pretend play in learning differed (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993, p. 165). Piaget considered this type of play as primarily a means by which to practice what one already understands about the world. In contrast, Vygotsky, viewing language as having an important role in knowledge construction, saw pretend play as a ‘first-order’ symbol system which contributed directly to the development of writing, a linguistic, ‘second-order’ symbolization process. Vygotsky considered pretend play to have a foundational role in the learning of symbolization, a process in which one thing stands for another (i.e., make-believe), leading directly to similar processes used in developing written language skills (p. 166).
Conclusion

The field of play study is a complex and varied one, rich with multiple perspectives and developing understandings of where play fits within the learning process. I am most interested in the connection between make believe (i.e., pretend play, socio-dramatic play, role-play) and meaning making, considering the conditions of learning created within a classroom play environment. At this point, multiliteracies theory not only supports the theoretical framework of this thesis, but provides the means and modes through which thesis content is communicated and examined. The next chapter offers an introduction to the classroom and group of ‘players’ who brought this research literature to life.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A multimodal approach involves a theoretical position that considers and weighs all modes of meaning making as equal, rather than emphasizing or privileging print text and verbocentric perspectives (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). I purposely chose research and documentation methods which were multimodal in nature, aiming for the ‘mode to match the message’ in my research. Still, as reflected by multiliteracies theory, these methods are, at most, “partially new” (Rowsell, Kosnik & Beck, 2008, p. 111) – my observations and field notes still reflect my training in educational psychology and clinical child observation. But the study has been designed to include multiple perspectives, by watching and documenting children’s play through multiple means and modes, by analyzing the data collaboratively with children and teachers, and by analyzing the study data through multiple theoretical lenses. Employing a grounded theory approach, where themes and theory emerge from the data, these methods were intended to offer a means through which to disrupt my own ‘ways of knowing,’ potentially offering multiple modes and vantage points from which to observe and attempt to understand children’s play, inspired by multiliteracies theory.

The following multimedia slideshow was developed as a means to share and celebrate the completion of data collection within the school community, and was consequently published as a picture book and made available for families and teachers. Engaging in its composition, I came to realize, also provided me with additional means through which to analyze the data, and construct meaning:

When Its Choosing Time: A Multimedia Slideshow

Figure 2: Video Clip ~ CLICK TO PLAY:

A Qualitative Approach: “Are you spying on us?”

This dissertation is situated within the qualitative research paradigm, a diverse and developing set of approaches, considered most appropriate, useful and rigorous in
offering a complicated and holistic analysis of human social life and learning (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). While colloquial wisdom might equate ‘child’s play’ with simplicity and ease, my teaching and research experience would support the notion that children at play are actually engaged in complex social, emotional, physical, and cognitive processes – processes which are engaging, challenging and sometimes perplexing, from the viewpoint of this qualitative researcher. Bowman (1993) describes children’s learning within an early childhood education environment, offering an account of these complex, dynamic processes: “The emerging picture of teaching and learning is of a broad range of factors buffering and intensifying experience for children, who, in turn, structure and elicit from their environment experiences that are meaningful to them” (p. 103). These meaning making processes, characterized by play, and the interface between play and literacy learning, are best examined with complex, detailed, qualitative modes of analysis.

Research study in the field of education, in general, and early childhood education in particular has traditionally been, and continues to be, dominated by methodological designs based within clinical developmental psychology (Engels, 2005; Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). Resting on positivist assumptions, these traditional approaches to child study have examined growth and development in isolated components, assuming that we can compile a ‘full picture’ of child development by examining small parts or segments – that we can unveil a universal, complete and singular picture of child development, and in so doing, control and predict developmental/educational outcomes. Positivist research also assumes a position of ‘objectivity,’ leaving the researchers’ perspectives, biases and viewpoints unexamined (or even acknowledged), and creating little, if any, room for participants’ perspective, voice or control over the research process.

A history of reliance on these traditional developmental/educational research approaches have, at least, made very limited positive impact on actual, real-life classroom contexts (Gage, 1989) – at worst, we have come to confuse our limited, segmented view of ‘parts’ as the ‘whole story,’ developing a skewed, limited and limiting view of children’s growth and learning, contributing to oppressive, flawed approaches to early education (Canella, 1997; Engels, 2005b). Children are most often valued for their future
potential, as adults, but “are devalued in terms of their present perspectives and experiences (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 3; Craine, 2004). In contrast, postmodern paradigms reconceptualize “children as persons”, who have value in the present, implying “a view of children as sentient beings who can act with intention and as agents in their own lives” (Green & Hill, 2005, p. 3; Hatch, 1995). It was my intention to design a study, conceptualizing children as persons who have value in the present, and in so doing disrupt assumptions and expand understandings of the value of play and the definition of literacy.
Figure 3: Qualitative research methods and modes of analysis offer rigorous tools for examining the complex social, emotional, physical, and cognitive processes which characterize children ‘at play.’

Interpretive research, centred in everyday contexts and aimed on “elucidating human meaning in social life,” is considered most useful in addressing the need for holistic study of children (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 108). Specifically, interpretive research most powerfully contributes to knowledge in the field of early childhood education because it explicitly involves giving meaning to research findings, and offers research that is more readily interpretable and relevant to practitioners (Walsh, Tobin & Graue, 1993).

I agree with Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin (2006) who, in their review of the significant impact of qualitative early childhood educational research over the past
decade, emphasize that the promise and possibility of these approaches are better realized when their assumptions, methods, strengths and limitations are clearly and distinctly explained. This study was designed to contribute to this growing and expanding body of knowledge, with a clear aim to be accessible and relevant to practitioners, through the following approaches:

1) gathering study data naturalistically, within a classroom setting;
2) using multimodal research tools/methods and a grounded theory approach to analysis, to offer multiple, emergent perspectives;
3) inviting and engaging the children and teachers as agentive researchers in the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation, and;
4) engaging in reflexive research processes, informed explicitly by my experiences, beliefs and viewpoint as a researcher, early childhood educator and mother.

Choosing a Methodology: A Naturalistic Approach

This study focuses on studying children’s play and learning as it occurs ‘naturally’ in the everyday life of a kindergarten classroom, recorded and interpreted by myself, and informed and influenced by the perspectives of the participants – certain children, teachers and parents who were part of this classroom community. Viewing classroom life from this perspective was challenging, as my view of learning is, admittedly, informed by years of training and experience as an early childhood educator, and so dominated by a ‘developmental model’ most often informed by grand theories in psychology and experimental psychology. Yet, years of working in ‘partnership’ with families, with an aim to empathize and teach responsively and responsibly, proved helpful in fostering relationships with children and teachers, as agentive researchers.

Finding a research site was challenging, also, as play does appear to be pushed to the margins, even where it once took centre stage. In the early conceptualization of this project, I spent time observing several public school kindergartens, considered reputable and of high quality, known within the teaching and higher education community for providing positive teaching and learning experiences to both children and teacher candidates. Although play materials were in evidence, and teachers included play-based learning, in addition to other developmentally-appropriate curriculum – nonetheless,
these classrooms would not have provided enough uninterrupted classroom freeplay on which to base a sustained research inquiry. Considering classroom routines, I noted:

The children are engaged for no more than a few minutes of pretend play, than they are called by the classroom teacher for a small-group literacy activity, or by the assistant for their turn at the computer centre. Freeplay time is truncated or pushed to the edges of the ½ day program, as the children leave their classroom for gym time, library time, computer lab, or music class. All arguably worthwhile activities, but…. It seems like a mirror of so many children’s home lives — so many activities competing for their freetime! Are we missing the forest for the trees? (February 16, 2007)

My thesis supervisor observed that analysis of such a kindergarten classroom may offer a compelling research project - a ‘thesis of interruptions’ – but I was most engaged by the question of the true value and optimal conditions of classroom play. Alternately, I visited kindergarten classrooms – both public and independent - where classroom activity focused on pencil and paper worksheets, seatwork, and specific literacy and numeracy curriculum outcomes – ‘quiet’ kindergartens where teachers did much of the talking/instructing and children followed directions. ‘Play time’ was viewed as an add-on, a reward for good behaviour, and a treat for those who had finished their work. Instead, I sought a study setting that included daily, uninterrupted periods of freeplay.

The study was conducted at the Community School2, an independent school in a metropolitan urban centre in Ontario, Canada (see Figure 4 for Data Collection Timeline). The school provided elementary education for Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 6, and children graduating from this program typically continued on within the ‘private’ school system. I chose this school setting and group of participants because the school structure offered a provision of extended periods of child-initiated freeplay in its full-day kindergarten program. As well, the school’s philosophy statement, family involvement and teaching practices emphasized ‘community’ and partnership; the agentive research methods I aimed to use were well-supported by school structures. The study worked within normal classroom schedules and routine, and the program was not altered through participation in the study.

2 The ‘Community School’ is a pseudonym, as are all children and teachers’ names.
Figure 4: Data Collection Timeline

With the school principal’s and classroom teachers’ consent (see Appendix B), Kindergarten Teachers and Assistants were consulted in an initial group discussion, and I learned more about the school and classroom program. Junior Kindergarten (JK) and Senior Kindergarten (SK) classes were each assigned a Qualified Teacher, though the groups shared common classroom space and the teachers taught co-operatively and collaboratively as a team. Two full-time Assistants, as well as Specialist Instructors for Art, Physical Education, French, and Music also supported the classroom community. The children were combined during freeplay time, or as it was called in this classroom “Choosing Time”, as well as at many other learning times.

We discussed the research topic, and questions, beginning to inquire together about our experience, knowledge and questions around the topics of play, literacy and gender – the teachers enthusiastically considered their classroom community and suggested that the Senior Kindergarten boys would offer the most interesting observational data as their pretend play scenarios were dynamic and illustrated instances of emergent literacy. Jennifer, the SK Teacher, laughed in anticipation of the image of my chasing after the groups of boys with my video camera, as they engaged in “Spy
This was my first introduction to the extent to which freedom of movement was extended to the children in this classroom community. Freedom of movement and tolerance for noise level were/are conditions I considered supportive to the children’s freeplay and would ironically come to challenge my ability to collect data, as sound quality and the ability to follow/record continuous play scenarios were limited. “No wonder psychologists do this in a laboratory,” I muttered to myself as the noise levels rose, the players skimed in and out of frame, or 3 children spoke at once – naturalistic research proved to be complicated, in many ways!

The school principal and classroom teachers were instrumental in inviting and organizing a Parent Workshop event, which I facilitated with my thesis supervisor; this also served as an information session and means to invite parental consent and participation in the project (See Appendix C for Session Handout). As a significant number of families were unable to attend the evening event, teachers were also very helpful in distributing information packages, and collecting consent forms (See Appendix B). In total, all 15 JK families (7 boys, 8 girls) and 20 SK families (10 boys, 10 girls) consented to participation and researcher field note-taking and collection of artifacts within the study. Two families declined to allow either videography or digital photography, while one family declined videography but consented to digital photography. I carefully worked to be mindful of these restrictions, using acceptable modes of data collection (i.e., note-taking) when particular children were involved in play groups, and/or adjusting the digital camera lens or pausing the video camera to keep those children out of frame. Admittedly, this, too, presented some challenges and limitations in the continuity and quality of data collection and analysis, and is recognized as a limitation in this naturalistic research process. Overall, however, the rate of consent and participation supported the intentions of this study, in terms of its design as a collaborative project relying upon multimodal data collection methods.
A Constructivist Approach to Grounded Theory

In seeking to observe, document, interpret, and understand children’s play and meaning making processes, I used a grounded theory approach to record and analyze classroom play episodes. Kindergarten classroom ‘freeplay’ or “Choosing Times” were observed through participatory observation and recorded using field notes, audio-recording, digital photography, and video-recording, as well as collection of artifacts. Data analysis was also informed by ‘checking in’ with participants through child and teacher interviews, and home visits with families. Triangulation of multiple data sources, as well as ‘expert’ checks of analyses were included in the study design so as to offer rigor and integrity to the qualitative research process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Roskos & Christie, 2001).

Considering the complexity of play phenomenon, in general, and play-literacy connection in particular, a grounded theory design was considered a most appropriate means by which to explore this study’s research questions. Grounded theory offers a
“systematic, qualitative procedure” by which to “generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level” complex processes - in this instance, children’s meaning making and construction of knowledge through play (Creswell, 2004, p. 396). I assert that existing theories and conceptualizations do not satisfactorily offer a fully textured picture of the connection between play and literacy, particularly within the context of boys’ school play and meaning making processes. Further, grounded theory “offers a step-by-step, systematic procedure for analyzing data”, and as such provides rigor, and also structure, considered particularly important for “the beginning qualitative researcher” (Creswell, 2004, p. 396). As explained by Charmaz (2006):

Stated simply, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories "grounded" in the data themselves. The guidelines offer a set of general principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules (see also Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont 2003). Thus data forms the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct. Grounded theorists collect data to develop theoretical analyses from the beginning of a project. We try to learn what occurs in the research settings we join and what our research participants’ lives are like. We study how they explain their statements and actions, and ask what analytic sense we can make of them. (p. 4)

I began data collection experimenting with a range of methods and modes, exploring the classroom, getting to know the teachers, children and routine, and 'playing' with recording equipment. Taking field notes felt most familiar, and seemed least obtrusive, and was my ‘fall back’ mode of data collection. Videotaping seemed most obtrusive, and proved to be the most challenging and cumbersome to analyze; I came to use this mode strategically, when children seemed to be engaged in a play episode that had the potential to be lengthy or when they wished to speak to me directly and asked to be recorded. I also employed a digital tape recorder, which proved most useful for recording teacher interviews, and for offering an additional audio source when transcribing videotaped play episodes. Generally, however, the quality of the audiotape as a primary method of data collection was poor, particularly when children were engaged in group discussion and moving freely around the classroom; some sort of individual microphone system would have been preferable, particularly for the purposes of language and discourse analysis (as discussed in the upcoming Limitations section of this chapter).
For the purposes of this study, I sampled consumer reviews and purchased a
digital single-lens reflex camera (DSLR), as it is designed to take multiple shots in quick
succession, thereby capturing children ‘in motion’ (DSLR; See
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_single-lens_reflex_camera for an explanation of
design principles and common models). This visual data was most compelling, and
manageable to work with in the first stages of open coding. “In open coding, the
researcher forms categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by
segmenting information” (Creswell, 2007, p.67). In addition to transcribing, reviewing
field notes and writing in a reflexive journal, I began sorting digital photographs
according to the type of play depicted: pretend play, constructive play, creative play,
rough and tumble play, and prop use. These categories were useful for sorting the large
numbers of photographs but, interestingly, problematic as so often children were engaged
in multiple types of play at any given time. Playing with the categories, sorting and re-sorting, I had opportunities to reflect on the ways in which the study of play has
artificially separated or differentiated play types according to adult criteria, rather than
based on the full complex, multi-faceted process which I was attempting to record.

Engaging in “constant comparison analysis” (Glaser, 1978; Cohen, Manion, &
Morrison, 2001, p. 151), I reviewed field notes and journal entries, highlighted emerging
themes, as well as recurrent questions/contrasts, and brought these findings to formal
interviews, email correspondence and informal conversations with the classroom
teachers. As well, questions were asked and conversations recorded when sharing the
visual data with teachers and children, during Choosing Time.

Throughout the next stage of coding (i.e., axial coding), “the investigator
assembles the data in new ways”, considering… “categories of conditions that influence
the phenomenon…specific strategies…identifies the context and intervening conditions
and…consequences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). Axial coding categories emerged as themes
relating to Knowing the Players, Classroom Learning Conditions, Play as
Multiliteracies/Multimodal, Defining Play, Dilemmas, Methodological Issues, and Links
to Literacy Curriculum. Field notes and transcriptions were colour-coded according to
these new categories and, in “selective coding,” I came to consider play episodes that
connected the categories, and highlighted emerging theory about what is ‘important’
about and for school play (p. 67). These categories and theories were discussed and interrogated in a final group interview with the Kindergarten teachers.

In the final stages of analysis, I proceeded with selective coding as data was further considered, connecting categories, and engaging in multimodal meaning making for the purposes of disseminating study results as a ‘work in progress’ – in addition to the thesis composition process, I composed and created a digital picture book (as viewed at the opening of this chapter), edited videotape segments of children’s play episodes and connected these to other recorded data (to be viewed in Chapter 4), and composed conference presentations, and interrogated findings at various academic and professional conferences, focusing on the topics of *The power and potential of ‘school play,’* *Boys’ Play and Literacy in Kindergarten,* *The Classroom as Third Teacher,* and *The Tools and Toys of an Emerging Researcher.*

Finally, through the writing process, the research questions were re-visited and three broad themes were synthesized regarding the *Classroom Play Environment,* *Defining Play,* and *Boys’ Play.*

**Inviting Participation: Child-Centred Research**

Inviting classroom teachers, children, and their families to act as ‘agentive researchers’ was also part of the qualitative, interpretive nature and ethical position of this research study design. This study was designed to be informed “in ways that recognize the competence of children and emphasize the importance of the perspectives of those living the experience” (Dockett & Perry, 2007, p. 48). Engaging young children as participants in research practice is considered an “active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings” based on spoken discussion and expanded to “include the many different verbal and non-verbal ways young children chose to communicate” (Clark, 2005, p. 491). While I worked to invite and engage teachers and children to “participate”, that is to become actively involved with an intention of “a sharing of power” (p. 491), upon reflection, the process often seemed to become one of “consultation”, rather than a full partnership. In the course of a busy classroom routine and as an *emergent researcher,* myself, I continually strove to find “ways of seeking the views” of children and teachers (i.e., “consultation”) (p. 491) and to
invite critical input; still, in the course of the study, the decision-making often came to still rest with me, in the role of *researcher*.

*How do you listen to the views and experiences of young children?*

"Why are you researching us?" ... "Are you a spy?" ... "Are you taping right now?" These were the most common questions asked by the Kindergarten children at the Community School, in those first moments of this research project. Vivian Paley (2005) reminds us “we are always on the periphery of the child’s world. Yet our clumsiness is forgiven by the children when they see that we respect their play enough to wonder what happens next” (p. 24). I attempted to use Paley’s approach as a guide, as well as continually working to conceptualize the children as agentive researchers and participants, rather than subjects of this research – an approach/ethic that involved a continual process of assuring ‘informed consent.’ Throughout my four months of data collection, the role of ‘participant observer’ needed to be defined and negotiated, explained and revised… made sense of… my presence and purpose in their classroom seemed viewed as both novelty and intrusion. Who was I, exactly, children wondered? A grown-up, certainly, but not really a teacher… or a teacher, but “not a Community School teacher”… a researcher, but what did that mean? I wondered, myself, about how to go about my role as participant observer, as I watched their play through the camera lens, fascinated by aspects that I had come to ‘tune out’ as a busy classroom teacher or mother – I became more aware of how often play became loud and rough, of the frequency of disagreement and power struggle, and of how children sometimes subtly cued discomfort with a glance or gesture toward the camera.

Alternately, the children at the Community School seemed to be positioned powerfully through the school’s child-centred philosophy and the teachers’ pedagogical approaches toward emergent curriculum, and so were accustomed to ‘having a voice’ and being respectfully considered in curricular focus and decision-making.

Overall classroom play was observed, with observations focusing on the play experiences of Senior Kindergarten (SK) boys. I chose to focus on particular play episodes based on the boys’ play patterns and choice of play partners. During *Choosing Time*, the children generally played in same-gender play groups, though
three SK girls (Mary, Anabella, and Emily) occasionally played in parallel or co-operatively with SK boys. These SK boys’ parents/guardians were invited to participate in an unstructured interview and home visit, with five of the boys’ families choosing to participate; home literacy and play experiences were recorded through note-taking. The class, as a whole, provided context for this study. I attempted to be inclusive so that all children, including those not specifically being focused on, would not feel left out.

Checking in with the classroom teachers, I was reassured that they perceived my presence as “unobtrusive”, and my presence and interaction in the classroom seemed to be “natural”.

My special place as researcher, or “not a Community School teacher”, seemed privileged as I was exempt, to some extent, from adult-teacher (i.e., authoritarian) responsibilities – I created my role as observer, recorder, resource and play partner. It was my tools, questions and interest, I surmise, that ultimately communicated and defined my role - cameras, tape recorder, and notebook. As I became more accustomed to the role of naturalistic researcher, my ways of thinking about child development and ‘evidence’ of learning shifted, also. The ‘development checklist’ that seemed to be planted in my head, influencing my assessment of children’s learning (e.g., Is he following one-step and two-step directions?), made way for other sorts of questions – and surprising answers and further questions surfaced. “Show me what else is important in your classroom…” “Where did that play idea come from?” “Why was that exciting? …interesting? …funny?” We had group and individual discussions about what we wondered about play and learning…about things like speaking, writing, reading, drawing, singing, dancing and building…about what children like to play at school, who they like to play with, and what props give them ideas. Many soon became engaged partners in the research process, offering opinions and direction, allowing me to join in or to fade into the background. "Come and look at these books." "Come, take a picture of our building." "You're on our spy team." "You should turn on your tape recorder." ...and, sometimes, through word, look or gesture, "No, not today."

It was my role as a play partner, offered by the children, as they made space for me, that allowed me to enter, observe and try to understand… and I took it as a
compliment when eventually their interest in my research tools and our inquiry faded – no one wanted to look at the photos or videotape from the day or week before…no one asked what I was writing in my notebook – I was simply asked to “come and play”; and so, just when I felt most a part of the classroom, it was also a sign that this inquiry was drawing to a close.

Reflexive Research Practices: Who Am I Now?

In common with other methods of qualitative research, grounded theory approaches explicitly acknowledge the interpretive role of the researcher, requiring researchers to “accept responsibility for their interpretive roles”, by not only offering an account of events and the viewpoints of those involved, but adding further interpretation (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 274). This highlights the importance of reflecting upon myself in context of the role of researcher, considering the personal/professional strengths and limitations I bring to the research, as well as acknowledging and considering my social position and how this may influence my interpretation. As Davies (1999) advises: “Asking a particular research question begins, then, with a recognition of how one is positioned in everyday life and of the constitutive force of particular forms of discourse in achieving and maintaining that positioning” (p. 15).

To put a reflexive approach into practice within the context of classroom research, my research methods included reflective journal entries when reviewing daily fieldnotes, and through multiple viewings of digital photography and videography, keeping an account of my thoughts, personal and professional responses, as well as emotional and physical reactions to the data collection process and content. This process was informed by Reggio Emilia-inspired approaches toward documentation “as a pedagogical strategy that promotes collaboration, reflection, and meaning-making” (Goldhaber, 2007, p. 75; Loris Malaguzzi International Centre, 2009) as well as reflective writing practices employed during my graduate coursework at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Kooy & Kanevsky, 1996).

Interrogating the data findings that reflected my experience and perspective, while exploring those that surprised me, I strove to actively question my assumptions and push the boundaries of my experience and understanding. These journal entries were helpful
in framing questions and categories for continual data analysis, as well as offering a frame for questions and topics to bring up when ‘checking in’ with children and teachers.

As a participant observer, at times actively engaging and involved in the children’s classroom play, at other times stepping into the background, I continually wondered and attempted to discern how my presence and involvement may be affecting the ‘players.’ As an experienced teacher, I have a significant background of experience in professional “kid-watching”, which has long been considered an optimal method of child study in understanding and supporting child language development (Goodman, 1978). Elliot Eisner (1991) relates such experience, at its most sophisticated level, to ‘expertise’ or ‘connoisseurship,’ a “consciousness of some aspect of the world…aspects that are subtle and complex” which involve not only an in-depth knowledge of the “history and background” of a subject, but an awareness of its “qualities” deemed necessary for reflection (p. 17). Accordingly, I could consider myself particularly skilled and prepared to engage in an observational study of children’s school play.

Alternatively, my teaching background and early training have been dominated by traditional discourses in educational and developmental psychology. These perspectives, characterized by static and limited ‘stages and ages’ theory (Canella, 1997; Engel, 2005b), still pervade my conceptualizations of children and teaching. Harste (1984) suggests that teachers and researchers must utilize “methodological stances where reflexivity and self-correction are possible” and that theory “must constantly be subject to reflection and change” (p. 49).

Through methods of self-study and reflective practice, I worked to step outside of traditional and personal frames of reference. This seemed particularly important as I engaged in ‘continual data analysis,’ viewing and reviewing videotape recordings, transcribing audiotape recordings, sorting and categorizing photographs, summarizing field notes and written child observations, as well as personal reflective journal writing. Knowing my ‘self’ was key in considering my own assumptions and biases, and looking at play and meaning making from multiple perspectives.

From the beginning of my work and training as an early childhood educator, in those common introductory assignments where teacher candidates are guided in considering ‘Who am I in the lives of young children?’ I have learned to continually
reflect and analyze the phenomenon of early education, considering my role and attempting to empathize and view the many possible experiences of the children in my care. In my years spent working in campus-based lab schools, where one is expected to work reflectively and collaboratively within teaching teams, and where classroom observation booths are outfitted with microphones and one-way glass, I became accustomed to co-teachers, parents, administrators and training teachers observing my teaching. These were respectful, supportive workplaces, involving much mentorship and in-service teacher development, and we were supported in reflecting on, analyzing and articulating the relationships between our understandings of educational theory and philosophy, and our collaborative teaching practice. Within this learning community, I was held ‘accountable,’ in holistic and supportive ways, and quickly the self-consciousness I experienced, teaching within a ‘fish bowl,’ shifted to self-awareness, particularly with respect to partnerships with families. I taught and cared for young children, knowing that at anytime a parent could be watching my interactions with their child through the observation glass – but really, I surmised, shouldn’t we always be consciously, whole-heartedly teaching as though a parent was observing us?

As I learned more about attachment theory, and the relationship between consistency and the social-emotional health of young children, my philosophy incorporated the idea that children’s home lives and school lives should be linked and reflect each other – that children require us to consider their home lives, and incorporate home languages, routines, values and parenting practices into our classroom community. My teaching practice came to reflect this philosophy, as I interacted with individual children as though their parent (admittedly, most often their mother) were ‘sitting on my shoulder’ – it was an instance/practice of make believe that informed my practice and allowed me to work on creative, empathetic and flexible approaches for differentiated teaching. It was at heightened moments of the day – when their child experienced some new discovery or milestone, or alternately, when the child struggled or was hurt - when I felt that I ‘channeled’ their parent; these moments also became a cue for the instances to document and share with families.

The qualitative research process has, in many aspects, been an extension and ‘deepening’ of these teaching approaches and philosophy. Qualitative analysis, in
essence, involves interpretive work, characterized by the inclusion of the “perspectives and voices of the people whom we study”, as well as explicitly considering one’s own role within this process of interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 274). The integrity of qualitative research rests, to a great degree, on identifying clearly one’s own place within the research, and striving to thoroughly include the perspectives and viewpoints of the research participants. Eschewing positivist attempts to objectify, control and quantify the elements of human interaction, naturalistic/qualitative/interpretive approaches have been found to effectively enable a researcher to ‘make sense’ of social phenomenon using a necessarily subjective viewpoint (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 19).

**Study Limitations**

While this qualitative research offers a useful in-depth perspective, it also has specific limitations that are important to explore explicitly. While this study examined children at play in an ‘everyday’ school setting, the experiences of this particular group of children, in this particular classroom, cannot be assumed to extend to all children. The stories described here are unique to this place, time, and group of participants, as well as to my interpretation. As Dockett and Perry (2007) would suggest, such a research project problematizes “the notion of one accurate interpretation of data and the generalizability of results” (p. 49). Thus, this study’s findings are specific to this select population, and not meant to be understood as generalizable to a wider population. Rather, this study offers an in-depth examination of children’s play processes, within this particular context, as a way to consider, question, wonder, interrogate, build, and consider important constructs in the field of early years education.

The aim of this study was to collect data naturalistically in a school play environment. The nature of the play environment, and the limitations of my collection equipment presented challenges in data collection and interpretation, ultimately affecting the focus of this study. During **Choosing Time**, children moved about the classroom freely and the classroom experienced high noise levels; thus, audiotape recordings were of poor quality and difficult or impossible to discern. In future research, individual microphone systems might prove helpful in addressing this limitation. For the purpose of this study, visual data provided the most substantial material and basis of results.
Likewise, family consent placed significant limitations on data collection, which impacted collection methods, the primary modes of data content, and thus influenced study results. As several families did not consent to their children appearing on videotape, I was limited in which play episodes could be recorded, and also in continuously filming complete play episodes when certain children entered the play episode/filming frame. Switching to alternate modes of data collection, and organizing/considering multiple sources became important. As most families provided consent for digital photography and fieldnote-taking, the DSLR camera lens and my personal teacher-researcher ‘lenses’ became foundational research tools and the primary sources of data.
The Spy Team is huddled under the computer table, hiding out in their “cave” to formulate a “spy plan”. “Now you’re on my spy team, okay?” Gregory had said, just moments before. “Yeah. Okay,” John and Eric said. “Pssst!!” Eric loudly exclaimed, gesturing for the others to hide under the table. Gregory had arrived in “disguise” – a moustache, fashioned from cardboard and fastened with cellophane tape – along with a “utility belt” similarly constructed at the art table and fastened around his waist. Eric signaled his entry into the play through his body language and gesture, locomoting across the room with an exaggerated ‘stealthy,’ creeping walk. John imitates Gregory’s wide-legged stance, and repeats partial phrases of the Spy Team’s script – “...get a walkie-talkie”; “Yeah, we’re gonna catch them...” “No!” “Yeah!”

“No!” I am huddled in the opposite corner, attempting to unobtrusively observe, taking field notes. It seems that I’ve gone unnoticed, watching the action through my DSLR camera lens, until the first click and sound of the shutter draws attention my way. “She’s taking our picture!” Eric said, excitedly. “No, you can’t! We’re spying...
on teachers!” Gregory said emphatically. Eric and John scramble out of the “cave”, examining my camera with interest. Gregory seems concerned by the interruption in the play, and having lost the focus of his “team.” When I had been introduced earlier that morning at circle time, we had discussed this project and my role as ‘researcher’ in their classroom. I had extended an invitation for the children to participate as “experts”, and assured the group that children could say “no thanks” or “stop” at anytime, when (not if) anyone didn’t want me to watch or take pictures of their playtime – Gregory’s response felt like a first test of my word and approach on this process of gaining consent. “I shouldn’t take your picture right now. I’m hearing you say that it’s not okay,” I respond, in what I hope is a reassuring tone of voice, and lay the camera aside, in an attempt to demonstrate respect and responsiveness. “No!” Eric and John protest, wanting their pictures to be taken. Gregory takes in this response from his playmates and seems to attempt to clarify his concern, “We’re spying on teachers!” “Ah, and I’m a teacher?” It seems that I’ve ruined the play, as documenting the action constitutes ‘spying’ on the ‘spy team’… this is more complicated than I anticipated, as John and Eric get louder and more adamant that being photographed is an exciting prospect – they pose and posture ‘in role,’ as spies, as I try to reassure Gregory that I won’t take photos without everyone’s permission. Gregory, seeming to want to resume the play script and possibly his position as director of the play, looks from me to his ‘team,’ and his face lights up. “No, it’s okay. You’re a teacher, but you’re not a Community School teacher. We’re spying on Community School teachers,” he announces to his playmates and me. “So, maybe it’s okay for me to take pictures? You’re not spying on me. I’m not a teacher, I’m a…” It occurs to me that I’m not so sure of my role in this instance, either! John and Eric continue to ask for their photo to be taken, directing their appeals to me and Gregory, pressing for consensus. Do they see it as adding to the play, or is it the novelty of my presence and the equipment? Does this documentation lend a performative aspect to the play? I’m simultaneously concerned that my presence is intrusive, excited by the dialogue with and between the boys, and cognizant, too, of how data will be limited when children aren’t feeling comfortable – as a new, ‘emerging’ researcher, I want to record everything! “You’re on our spy team,
okay?” Gregory said. “But the teachers don’t know you’re on our spy team, okay?” As I consider this invitation, frankly relieved to have found a solution that will allow data collection, the boys return to their play, directing me to photograph.

“There’s a grownup on our spy team, but you don’t know!” Gregory moves about the room, informing each of the teaching team members (who, I note, are playfully accepting of this conspiracy!) “There’s a grownup on our spy team, but you don’t know. There’s too many grownups!” The subtext/double entendre of Gregory’s last comment was lost on me, until later transcribing, but in the coming days I come to feel a special privilege, and a deep gratitude for Gregory’s decision to ‘play along’ in the project, and for suggesting a creative, playful way for me to join ‘the spy team.’

In this chapter, I present how the data demonstrated, illustrated and supported previous research about what is important for play and literacy learning in early childhood education classrooms. I also consider surprising findings, which prompted puzzling, questioning, re-visiting the data and research literature time and time again…ultimately, I have come to re-consider and reconceptualize aspects of play and learning, leaving continuing issues for wonder and inquiry.

Theme #1: The Classroom as ‘Third Teacher’

Setting the Stage

During my first days as participant observer, I spent time considering the classroom space, ‘interviewing’ the physical, social and aesthetic aspects of the classroom as “third teacher” (Gandini, 1998, p. 177). The Reggio Emilia approach to education considers there to be three teachers in the classroom: the child, the teacher and the learning environment. “By seeing the environment as an educator…we can begin to notice how our surroundings can take on a life of their own that contributes to children’s learning” (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007, p. 40). Reggio-inspired research of children and place has considered ways in which children experience and use space to create meaning (Fraser, 2006; Tarr, 2004), and ways that teachers work to create a balance between
offering structure and freedom within a learning environment (Cadwell, 2003; Tarini & White, 1998). Ellis (2004) asserted that “notions of place and space can invite researchers' on-going attention to students' opportunities for belongingness and creative self-development in schools” (p. 91). Thoughtful arrangement of learning space, and addition of novel props and materials, are thought to offer invitations and provocations for children’s curiosity, imagination, and experience.

When the classroom was empty and quiet I wandered through, photographing and considering the space and organization, thinking about concepts of ecological and socio-cultural theory in relation to the physical environment and social systems in which these children were living, playing and learning. Vygotsky (1978), Wells (1986), and Bruner (1996) considered the social origins of mental functioning, where ways of thinking are modeled and supported within social activity and relationship, eventually becoming internalized. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) developed a bioecological model that considers the interplay between personal/psychological characteristics and social context/conditions as impacting developmental processes over time. As described by Ring (2006): “The inclusion of the child as a central ‘biosystem’ acknowledges the centrality of psychological thinking whilst recognizing that genetic material does not produce finished traits but rather interacts with environmental experience in determining developmental outcomes” (p. 64). Change and transformation is a key element of this perspective as “the outside world makes its way inside and becomes transformed in the process just as the individual from birth begins to change its environment, bringing the inside outside, which too becomes transformed in the process” (Roskos, 2000, p. 128). Previous research would indicate that the qualities of the environment are influential in various modes of meaning making, in relation to the organization of the environment, the provision of materials, and the role modeling of behaviours by more capable others (Neuman & Roskos, 1992, 1997; Ring, 2006; Vukelich, 1994).
Figure 7: Mess and high noise levels were tolerated by teachers, and viewed as signs of excitement, success and engagement.

**Physical Environment: Interview with a Classroom Playspace**

On first examination, the classroom was unusual in some ways, and quite ordinary in others. Made up of three rooms, joined by wide, open doorways, this unusual design offered plenty of natural light, but limited space – strategic shelving, and storage boxes indicated the time and thought teachers put into using the space creatively and effectively. In many other respects, though, this kindergarten classroom was quite typical in content and design. The classroom was arranged into the individual learning centres common to early childhood environments– active block and dress-up areas, quiet book and computer areas, writing centre and art centres, as well as classroom pets and plants.

While the materials were plentiful, the learning centres contained much of what I have come to expect from a play-based environment. If I was expecting to see materials that were somehow ‘high end,’ this being a privileged school in a prosperous neighbourhood, I noted that the learning materials were ordinary and everyday, though very plentiful. (See Appendix A for a material list.) Visual organization and “easy
access to richly varied and sufficiently abundant materials” have been found to affect the quality and frequency of children’s active interaction with objects, and thus their opportunities for learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2001, 284).

Spending time within the room and becoming part of its learning community, I became aware of a unique sense of purposefulness in the design and physical organization of the classroom space. There were no items on shelves, walls or tables that were not used in a purposeful way within the course of classroom routine. There were no superfluous posters on the walls, materials collecting dust on a shelf, or an activity centre that was seldom used. While the room was very full, it was not ‘cluttered.’ Tarr (2004) suggested that “visual busyness” may inhibit children’s concentration (p. 88). In contrast, this environment seemed to support attention and engagement.
Figure 8: Classroom organization and ample materials invite multiple possibilities and outside-the-box thinking, as well as independence and autonomy.

The classroom became very messy during Choosing Time. Children moved freely around the room and were allowed to ‘stretch out’ during the course of creating, building, and playing. They were not expected to clean an area before moving on to another activity, and could freely move materials within playspaces. Significantly, adults’ tolerance for what Pahl (1999, as cited by Ring, 2006) characterizes as
“purposeful mess” is viewed as influential in “the child’s development of a playful disposition and a mastery orientation towards meaning making” (p. 74).

At the end of these extended periods of playtime, the children and teachers cleaned the classroom collectively, typically with CDs playing as a motivator and signal to ‘tidy up.’ Children often asked for the “five, six, seven, eight song”, a particularly fast tune, which prompted the group to hurry, and ‘pick up the pace.’ Tidy time was a quick and active transition for children and teachers; a celebratory, playful atmosphere was evident, and what can be a repetitive, cumbersome routine seemed to unfold with ease and enjoyment. This transition was illustrative of the general approach toward the physical-social structure of the classroom.

The classroom space and routine were designed to allow and encourage children to re-visit their activities, and direct their own learning. Being explicitly prompted to think, estimate, and act upon one’s own strengths, needs, and preferences supports a sense of individuality, and self-efficacy – that is, knowing what you know, and having a realistic sense of your own capabilities. It was interesting to note what children were encouraged to take responsibility for, in terms of their own learning and, alternately, the ways in which they were expected to contribute toward the collective classroom community. Albert Bandura (1986), considering the interplay between the ‘self’ and the external environment, asserted that the beliefs one has about oneself are key elements in the exercise of self-control and personal agency, influencing one’s capability to alter their environment and shape their own actions. Such capabilities, he asserted, impact our abilities to symbolize, learn from others, plan alternative strategies, regulate our own behaviour, and engage in self-reflection. Understanding self-efficacy and its contribution to thought processes and action adds important dimension and texture to my understanding of play and literacy processes, the interplay of risk-taking, and self-image.
Figure 9: The classroom environment supported social constructivist approaches, viewing children as competent and capable users of oral and written language. How might this impact self-efficacy?

**Social Environment**

The rooms observed in this study were, characteristically, noisy and active spaces where children were allowed high levels of autonomy in regards to their freedom of movement, activity choice and noise level, particularly during **Choosing Time**. The classroom could be considered unique or exceptional in these respects. Kindergarten classrooms are typically structured with specific rules designed to manage behaviour, attempting to ensure safety and order. Common rules involve limiting the number of children in each learning centre/area, requiring children to ‘tidy’ an area before moving on to further activity, or signaling children when noise levels rise (e.g., turning classroom
lights off, or ringing a bell to cue children to quiet). These approaches to classroom ‘management’ reflect a behaviourist approach toward early childhood education (Greenberg, 1992).

Figure 10: The Community School Kindergarten did not utilize common behaviourist approaches to “classroom management”, such as these marketed by school suppliers. The ‘Talk Light’/‘Yacker Tracker’ employs negative reinforcement, with lights and an alarm sounding when noise levels rise; a management chart rewards “good behaviour”.

In contrast, the Community School Kindergarten program’s more fluid structure can be seen to reflect a social constructivist perspective, viewing children as competent and capable. This perspective would promote self-regulation, with an aim to recognize and foster children’s sense of agency; it can be considered key in creating a classroom environment that supports children’s emergent literacy practices (Hill & Nichols, 2006). Children’s social and meaning making actions and processes were viewed as being purposeful and intentional. Where children needed support may be considered more “a
matter of sophistication, practice and experience, not a particular stage of psychological development” (p. 154).

Classroom teachers described the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching as inspirational in this conceptualization of children and language, as well as the work of Costa and Kallick (2000), emphasizing the promotion of creative problem-solving approaches - “habits of mind” - which are thought to characterize effective learning (p. 1). The JK teacher, Sharon, described the classroom teaching philosophy as:

Primarily...children need to play. That's the main reason for the freedom. That they need to be able to make choices. That they need to explore, make their own rules, be innovative, improvise, problem-solve and self regulate. Our environment is very carefully set up and structured so that the children can experience all of this in a way that is meaningful to them…. The philosophy is about individualising, integrating, inquiring, reflecting and doing it in a way that children can make sense of and can take ownership of.

Reflected in teaching practice, classroom teachers were less likely to apply general rules, or to see their role as ‘managers’ of the group. Rather, demonstrating respect and fostering a sense of agency provided explicit basis for constructive teaching practice. Fostering self-regulation within the social context of the classroom was looked on as a process, co-constructed through dialogue between classroom community members, rather than established and transmitted from adult to child.

Teachers utilized rule negotiation, with individual children or within small groups of playmates, as opportunities for differentiated learning. While the child is viewed as capable, teachers nevertheless reveal how their authority is exercised and limits implemented, as described by SK teacher, Jennifer:

(When children ask permission for something)... more often than not, the answer is going to be “yes”, and when it’s “no”, it’s because we’re trying to nudge a child into taking a risk that they’re not inclined to take and (we consider) that they need to have that limit imposed for them because they’re not going to realize, themselves, that they’re capable and able to do it.
Figure 11: Responsible risk-taking offered opportunities for problem-solving and was considered a safe and healthy approach to learning.

Children were observed enacting ‘self-made’ or ‘self-imposed’ rules during play times, though they sometimes attributed these rules to the classroom. Whether the children actually perceived these rules to be outside themselves, or whether they attributed them to the classroom or teachers as a means of asserting power or authority remained in question.

While the social environment may be viewed as more fluid or ‘loose,’ I would not characterize it as disorganized or necessarily ‘unstructured.’ Jennifer described how she conceptualized and celebrated the synergy between classroom, child and teacher, during Choosing Time:

The environment as teacher – the environment is so deliberate, it’s not neutral…the child has the agency and is making the choices and it’s the adults’ roles as scaffolders and enrichers – we have a role, but we revere freemlay as a time to have great materials, time, space and playmates… at Choosing Time, the world’s your oyster.

Fostering this sense of agency extended to how children were viewed, treated and socially positioned within the context of school curriculum. Conceptualized as
“researchers” “artists” and “scientists”, children’s questions and interests drove the classroom’s emergent curriculum. During the period of study observation, inquiry and curriculum were prompted by children’s interest in anything from African animals to hockey to outhouses to superheroes. Teachers trusted children’s capability in asking and answering interesting questions, making authentic connections, and having wonderful ideas.

Figure 12: John led his father in exploring a model of a crocodile, which culminated a project on African animals. “Thank you for showing me your research,” commented his father.

**Supporting Multimodal Understandings**

This Kindergarten classroom offered a teaching and learning environment that was in many ways designed with a view toward multimodal conceptualizations of literacy and text, as evidenced by:

1. Multimodal environmental text, using a variety of sign systems;
2. the degree to which these texts were real, meaningful and relevant to the children within the context of daily classroom routine, and;
3. the program’s pedagogical approach – collaborative and relational - toward creating text and meaning.
Iconic, visual and print literacies were utilized prominently, and purposefully within the classroom using various sign systems. Sign systems are considered foundational to creating meaning and understanding (Harste, 1994). Bulletin boards displays were constructed with photographs featuring the classroom’s children, communicating classroom rules and routines through visual text, print, and design – a variety of sign systems. These visual texts were combined with written word, were meaningful and relevant to children within the context of classroom routine, and children were involved in their design and use within the classroom. Further, collaboratively produced images, as opposed to “commercially stereotyped images”, can potentially make visible “the actual lived experience of those individuals learning together” (Tarr, 2004, p. 90). Semiotics recognizes texts as ideological, coming from “our set of beliefs and assumptions about the world” (Albers, 2001, p. 7). ‘Reading’ the classroom walls, I understood that children’s processes and products were valued, that adult-child collaborations were viewed as important, and that print and visual sign systems as well as digital tools were central.
Figure 13: Children routinely participated in creating classroom postings using traditional materials (e.g., markers, pens, paper) and print, combined with digital tools (e.g., computers, DSLR camera) and visual texts (e.g., photographs, illustrations).
Figure 14: Traditional rules, illustrated with digital photographs, and displayed with print and visual text. The gestures depicted in these photographs were occasionally used as a ‘fingerplay’ chant during large group times, bringing together oral language, gestural, visual and printed texts.
“Can you show me what is important about your classroom?” proved to be a useful question and invitation, in terms of engaging children in the research process, and in coming to understand the physical and social dynamics of the classroom. Children and teachers, alike, valued a communication board, which incorporated varied texts in purposeful ways (See Figure 16). Children visited this board at the beginning of the day, finding their nametag for the purpose of determining where they had been assigned for “First Activity” (a structured playtime, during which teachers assigned children to a specific learning centre). Photograph symbols, accompanied by print text, laid out the day’s routines and activity choices in ways that were consistent, but individualized to some extent each day. The board was also used to post all sorts of visual and print texts, which were meaningful and relevant to the classroom community - photographs, inquiry questions, newsletters, poems, reminders, etc.; this board became a high interest ‘informational collage’ representing and assisting in the day’s structure and routine.
Figure 16: Employed daily, this magnetic white board was utilized by teachers to graphically communicate each child’s daily routine, and small group assignments, as well as offering access to texts of interest and relevant to the classroom community (i.e., school newsletter, postcards, lists of children’s inquiry interests, probing questions etc.)

In a variety of ways, the classroom demonstrated literacy as a social phenomenon, effectively communicating informative, aesthetic and socially meaningful messages. In these ways, the classroom exemplified an “ideological model of literacy” suggesting that “there are multiple literacies rather than a single literacy and that the use of these literacies creates engagement, involves wider networks, and is consistently related to the everyday lives of people in their communities” (Street, 1984; Hall, 2000, p. 190). Classroom bulletin boards and decoration could be viewed as practical ‘art installation,’ and were most often collaboratively imagined, created and shared within contexts that were relevant to classroom community – teachers, children and families.
Figure 17: This bulletin board, located next to the teacher’s desk, provided a biographical ‘collage’ of printed texts, visuals, and artifacts communicating teacher’s own interests, values, and identity as a “Community School Teacher”.
Pedagogical approaches included recognizing the many languages of childhood, involving multiple ways of constructing meaning and representing knowledge. Drawing, constructing, printing, painting, dancing, moving, designing, singing, computing – children’s various modes of learning were recognized and supported within the context of capable peers (including regular integration with children from upper grade levels), a teaching team of adults, and family involvement.

Figure 18: “Touch his back. Crocodiles have bumpy skin.” Student-led conferences involved sharing knowledge and an account of learning processes through multimodal means.

The full-day context of the Community School’s Kindergarten program can also be seen to have contributed to supportive pedagogical approaches. Studies of kindergarten have concluded that in full-day programs, teachers recognize opportunities to more fully utilize developmentally-appropriate pedagogical methods including more individualized interactions with children, individualized observational assessment and planning, as well as richer and more integrative curriculum planning (OECTA, 2008).
Theme #2: A Definition of Play

David Elkind (2006) challenges us to consider the “power of play” with fresh eyes within the context of changing technology, family life, and globalization—but also from the personal perspective of children’s social-emotional happiness and holistic learning. As I strove to look at play from multiple perspectives, through multiple lenses, both figurative and literal, my previously held definitions and categories for play felt less...
and less comfortable. I considered myself as someone who viewed play as ‘complex’; however, my initial categories of analysis proved simplistic (i.e., pretend play, constructive play, rough and tumble play, prop use), as ‘types of play’ proved to happen simultaneously, in tandem or dove-tailed together. Sharing and analyzing play episodes with co-researchers – teachers and children – it was interesting to find how textured, complex and multi-faceted these ‘play texts’ proved to be. Each ‘viewer’/’reader’/’interpreter’ brought unique perspectives, and previous experience – the collaborative research process added further texture and complication. As I viewed and re-viewed the data, discussed results with co-researchers, and reviewed relevant research literature, I made connections to how these results supported previous research in the study of play and children’s practice of literature behaviour – and how the results presented challenges and new perspectives on the definition of play – defining ‘play as multiliteracies,’ and play episodes at ‘text.’
Previous research suggests that while engaged in make-believe, children live in the ‘as if,’ ‘what if’ world, imagining themselves within scenarios that reflect their everyday lives, as well as fantasy worlds, and potential imaginary futures. Naturalistic classroom research found that literacy materials in play centres stimulated and supported children’s literate behaviour (Farran, Aydogan, Kang & Lipsey, 2006). At the Community School, children were observed practicing literate behaviour in the context of recreating social routines from their everyday lives. Making a card for a parent or designing signs for a grocery store play theme, these sorts of literacy play
events were often supported and celebrated by teachers, as well as “propped” by the creative literacy materials available in the writing, craft, drama and block centres.

Might this type of experimentation and risk-taking be especially supported within ‘make believe,’ what Vygotsky considered a ‘zone of proximal development?’

Boys most often practiced literate behaviour within fantasy scenarios characterized by themes of adventure. Finding the first letter of one’s name on a “spaceship control panel” or writing down the names of “the other spy agents” in a coil ring notebook, children demonstrated code-breaking skill as well as knowledge of concepts of print, and understandings of the social utility of literacy practices. “I wrote your name in my book!” declared Michael to a spy team adversary. With a tone of authority, a furrowed brow and a wide-legged stance, the written word added an officious legitimacy to this play scenario.

Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, observing this creative play helped make visible children’s interests and conceptual understandings, as well as offering a
window into the sorts of literacy events they experience out-of-school. Documenting and reflecting on these play episodes prompted questions about play’s place in the curriculum, and its most compelling links to literacy development. Admittedly, children demonstrated discrete code-breaking skills, such as letter recognition – but were these the most significant or profound aspects of these play episodes? Did these instances offer the most compelling rationale for ensuring play’s place in the kindergarten classroom?

Observing small group literacy lessons, part of this classroom’s balanced approach to early literacy teaching and learning, boys engaged in extended experimentation – writing, discussing and comparing letter names, shapes, sounds, and uses. These small group instruction times, led by an adult (Teacher, Teacher Assistant, or Literacy Specialist), were certainly playful – boys joked with each other, engaged in word and sound play, and imitated each other and partnered in creating letter shapes – teachers were tolerant, even supportive, of boys’ camaraderie in these small group contexts. However, children would not consider these times as “play”, and Choosing Time was seen as the best and most fun time of the day.

These teacher-led times could be considered most instrumental in developing code-breaking literacy skills. However, it was most interesting to observe how some boys utilized these ‘code cracking’ skills in play contexts, and to consider what utilization of those skills might mean for their vision of themselves as “text-users” (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Some of my observation time was spent following the full-day of programming, to consider Choosing Time in context of other literacy events – plenty of daily read aloud of a variety of fiction (picture books, chapter books), as well as oral storytelling (fiction and non-fiction), enriched this Kindergarten language arts curriculum. Specialized teaching and learning in visual arts also provided meaning making opportunities to the children’s day of learning in ways that I came to see as connecting, supporting and being supported by children’s Choosing Time experiences.
Figure 22: Play episodes were observed to be part of a whole process of meaning making, in which children re-visited, re-created, re-visioned multiple texts.

Props and Playthings

With respect to meaning making and interpreting children’s choices, constructing their own play props and building constructions were the most favoured activities, with open-ended construction materials being the materials of choice. Boys did not often use writing and drawing instruments to produce 2-dimensional symbol systems during Choosing Time. Groups of girls were frequently observed at the ‘art’ table, with markers and coloured pencils in hand, reflecting previous research findings which found that boys engaged in “prolonged preference for three-dimensional activity” (Ring, 2006, p. 80). However, while the boys in Ring’s study were seen to be required to move from 3- to 2-dimensional representation by “an educational system which seemed to prioritize writing over drawing and separate the two symbol systems far too quickly” (p. 80), the boys at the ‘Community School’ were not required to adopt an ‘either/or’ attitude. Multiple sign systems and varied approximations were recognized, valued, and celebrated within this classroom context. Could these social contexts have further supported children’s risk-taking and experimentation? Interestingly, gendered behaviour and difference persisted, notwithstanding social support and tolerance for individual difference.
Cardboard, boxes, duct tape, cellophane tape, masking tape, pipe cleaners, and wooden building blocks – open-ended construction materials, in short – were boys’ favoured playthings during classroom observation. Jewitt (2008) asserts “how knowledge is represented, as well as the mode and media chosen, is a crucial aspect of knowledge construction, making the form of representation integral to meaning and learning more generally” (p. 241). Was it the 3-dimensional aspects of these creative materials that offered the most satisfying medium for meaning making? Were the gross motor, and kinesthetic aspects of constructive play particularly satisfying and engaging?

Boys often seemed intent on making objects that had a physical use, and would be associated with their ‘character’ within the context of favourite play scenarios. These constructed props were often constructed in tandem, as the boys played in pairs or trios, and would be constructed in imitation by other boys during the course of the morning. It was interesting to consider at what point the ‘play’ began – is the constructing the prop in preparation for make believe, or part of the make believe itself? A boy typically seemed to enter his role once the prop was complete and in place – but I observed that his voice and body demeanor would sometimes change in anticipation. The expertise and initiative that an individual boy displayed in constructing a prop, and the extent to which he was recognized and shared that expertise with his peers, also seemed to carry over into play scenarios and character.
Figure 23: “M. how’d you do that? I’m gonna build one!” The boys create “walkie-talkies” while playing “spy team”.

Observing play through camera lenses changed my viewpoint, I noticed aspects of play that I had previously ‘tuned out’ while supervising with my teacher or mother’s eye. Upon frequent viewing and re-viewing of the visual data I became differently aware of the importance of ‘sensory’ and ‘physical’ aspects of play materials. In considering meaning making and representational objects, Kress (1997) observes:

These are ideas, concepts, notions, feelings, relations, affective states which are properly expressed in the way they are expressed here [as physical objects], and translation into language produces at best an impoverished account…This translatability or the lack of it, can give us an important clue both about criterial aspects of writing and of two-dimensional representation, namely their relative flatness, and the cognitive and affective “distance” from the maker…[in contrast, three-dimensional objects] gives me the possibility of a real tactile relation. I can feel how heavy or light it is, how smooth its surface, feel its shape, its dynamic quality….I can move it about and place it in entirely new environments, with other objects, to form new structures in new imagined and real worlds. Its affective qualities and potentials are entirely different from those of the flat, two-dimensional object…[three-dimensional
objects] actually can and do become real objects in this real world. (p. 23-24)

Multi-sensory objects seemed to add greater potential for engagement, dimension and depth in play. Individual children frequently spoke ‘in role’ toward the full-length mirror in the dress-up corner, repeating phrases, posing, or directing comments and directions to other players –but still watching their mirror image closely. Water in the sand table created better opportunities for changing the shape and texture of the sand, the colour of the rocks, and the opportunities for collaborative storying. Multi-sensory materials appeared to support engagement, creating optimal play conditions that Vygotsky would have us recognize as a ‘zone of proximal development.’ What else, I wondered, contributed to the optimal play conditions that seemed so evident in this Kindergarten classroom?
Figure 24: Multi-sensory materials seemed to engage and deepen children’s play.

Reading the Word and the World: Child Interests Are Important

The having of wonderful ideas, which I consider the essence of intellectual development, would depend ...to overwhelming extent on the occasions for having them. Eleanor Duckworth (1987, p. 275)
I wait outside the door of a large heritage-style house on a sunny, tree-lined street. This home visit is planned to help ‘fill in the blanks’ – to ‘check in’ with families, share what I think I’ve learned from and with their children over the past semester’s project, get a fuller picture of the children’s out-of-school lives and literacies, and gain family input. I have enjoyed these visits, getting a glimpse of home life, hearing about where and when families play and what they value for their children. Out-of-school play has been described as quite different from school play, as parents highlight roughhousing and “wrestling”, emphasizing that this type of play seems worthwhile and necessary for their boys. While parents articulated an understanding as to why this might need to be limited in a school context, many also considered their boys’ apparent need for activity and competition as acceptable and appropriate. As early childhood educators, we generally consider competitive activities to be developmentally inappropriate – are sports and competitive activities mutually exclusive from ‘the arts’ and ‘intellectual’ pursuits, many parents wondered? I have been wondering, too...why are many boys so interested in competitive things? If so many boys are interested, why do we consider them to be inappropriate?

As families toured me through their boys’ favourite playspaces, I realized that I’d learned to view ‘text’ more broadly to include high interest, commercial texts and had come to more easily recognize the power of children’s interest in iconic and visual literacy. I was better able to recognize and accept alternative texts, as boys toured me through their bookshelves and toy boxes - iconic sports souvenirs, videogame characters, comic books, superhero graphics, and cartoon characters adorned boys’ home bookshelves. The traditional children’s literature was also found there, but when asked about their “favourites”, boys most often pointed out commercial texts.

On this particular home visit, admittedly, I was a little nervous and curious as to how John might feel and respond to my arrival. While he engaged and participated often throughout the project, providing some of the most thought-provoking data and heart-warming images, I also saw him, in some ways, as most vulnerable and, significantly, likely to cue me to ‘back off’ or ‘stop’ in recording and participating in his ‘school play.’ I hoped he wouldn’t find this visit to be too intrusive, and had wondered how to make it fun and enjoyable for him. Knowing how much he and his family enjoyed hockey- and
how hockey texts and play themes had featured highly in his ‘school play’ – I purposely wore an NHL jersey over my skirt and blouse. John’s face lit up, when he answered the door, and he ran upstairs and back down with an assortment of hockey jerseys from his bedroom, displaying them across the living room floor, pointing out the team names and colours, as I visited with his parents. Our visit included a display of his favourite toys and sports equipment, as well as a tour of the family’s backyard playspace.

Understanding of the children as individuals and appreciation of the context of their families and friends outside of school was highly valued within this classroom community, as evidenced by conversation and acknowledgement of children’s out-of-school life and interests. This school also provided a social community for families. Teachers would chat with children about out-of-school social occasions, such as two classmates/playmates having a sleepover. Parents, when picking up children at the end of the school day, often chatted with and hugged other families’ children - were socially and physically affectionate. Families were invited to participate in information/resource gathering and inquiry during emergent curriculum processes, as well as being involved in curriculum celebration at regular seasonal events, and student-led conferences.

Choice and individual interests were incorporated into whole class discussion times, and children’s play choices inspired teachers’ curriculum and classroom planning. During personal interviews, classroom teachers clearly relished their connection to children, as individuals, and strove for authentic connections and engagement with family members. Children were also viewed within the context of their preferred playmates, as a group. ‘Spy team’ and ‘sports’ play themes, favourites among the Senior Kindergarten boys, were acknowledged and supported, though teachers admittedly felt tensions when play involved competition and rough-housing, as we re-visit in detail in an upcoming section. Much teacher interview discussion involved individual and group interests, wondering about what dimensions or aspects of these interests were most satisfying for the players.
Figure 25: An expert teacher, watching closely as boys are engaged in a small group project designed and offered with their interest and favourite construction materials in mind – in this instance, a hockey rink is fashioned from cardboard, paint, tape.

The Hockey Rink: The Importance of Children’s Interests in Play and Learning
Figure 26: Video Clip – CLICK TO PLAY:

“Teams” and competition were common themes for several boys, within play episodes and in discussion about out-of-school play. Hockey and sports themes were common interests, in ways that did not seem superficial or stereotyped. Hockey held a particularly special place for John, as his family was involved in a hockey league – he
had met and his family had billeted hockey players, his wardrobe included many special hockey jerseys, and his interest and expertise were acknowledged by teachers and fellow students. He had given a special hockey jersey to Andrew, his preferred school playmate. Observing John in the block centre during Choosing Time, I noted him beginning a structure with a particular sense of purpose. The way that John placed his blocks in the centre of the room, and set to building seemed like an assertion or what his teachers might characterize as “taking a responsible risk.” When asked about the structure, he responded that he was building “a hockey rink”. He chose not to elaborate verbally, but seemed satisfied/encouraged when I simply ‘pitched in’ to help – imitating his building approach (See Figure 26); he persisted, and soon a number of JK boys became involved. Planks became “hockey sticks”, and wooden bongs became “pucks”; the boys’ faces lit up, as “pucks” ricocheted off “the boards”, making echoing sounds. While reviewing the week’s documentation The Hockey Rink play episode sparked an excited response from a small group of children; I asked John where this play idea had come from: “From my hockey jersey,” he replied, gesturing toward the team icon on my laptop screen. I was surprised by this answer, and began to investigate children’s play ideas and interests from a new perspective, considering other texts that captured John’s interest, as depicted at the end of the video (See Figure 26).

From an adult perspective, play may seem spontaneous in nature and by definition – “Play is exactly the opposite of a goal-directed activity. Play is spontaneous. This spontaneity is its essence – an activity for and of itself” (Balke, 1997, p. 358). Observing play through adult eyes – as an objective ‘arms length’ observer, or even as a participant observer - would not necessarily challenge this commonly held assumption about play in early childhood. However, engaging children in the research process offered new insight and perspective on their choices, interests, and inner processes, as we inquired as to what elements of play may correspond with meaning making processes. As play ideas and episodes were documented and discussed with children and teachers, I came to see them as ‘text,’ and found that they were often connected with various other multiple ‘texts,’ including icons (particularly on clothing), toys, picture books, illustrations, websites, TV/DVD shows, motion pictures, and temporary body tattoos. What had seemed to be
‘spontaneous’ play behaviour, became viewed as multiliteracies - intentional meaning making - which was intertextually linked to other texts, a play theme or idea re-played, re-visited, re-created through multiple modes.

**Ship Building: Making Connections to Text Through Art-full Play**

**Figure 27: View video clip – CLICK TO PLAY:**

Owen’s shipbuilding was based on an illustration of the Titanic, found in a classroom picture book. Classroom creative materials (i.e., paper tubes, cardboard boxes), as well as interactions with his play partner, also suggested ways in which to create/recreate a ship with a row of “steam/smoke” stacks. In subsequent observation and in conversation with Owen, this play text was also intertextually linked to a Play Mobile toy set, Pirates of the Caribbean movie and book, a Pirateology toytext, and re-visited during visual art class. Owen’s creative play offers an illustration of the ways in which connections are made, compositions inspired, and knowledge constructed within the context of multiple texts…

Popular culture, particularly fantasy world superheroes and sports icons, featured prominently in boys’ play and literacy interests, supporting previous research findings relating to boys’ “identity formation and sense of self” (Ring, 2006, p. 79; Pahl, 2001, 2002 as cited by Ring, 2006). Children and adults, alike, questioned the boundaries and limitations of gender expectations (as I will re-visit in an upcoming section), around what was considered appropriate representational material impacted boys’ use of symbol systems. Kress (1997), in considering a social semiotic theory of representation and communication, observed that signs “arise out of our interest at any given moment…This interest is always complex and has physiological, psychological, emotional, cultural and social origins. It gets its focus from factors in the environment in which the sign is being made” (p. 11). The children’s environment – the classroom, home and family life, popular culture, the children’s consumer market, virtual worlds… children were observed making sense of the word, and their world through dynamic meaning making processes.
“Pretend I’m controlling a robot…” Play Objects Offering Invitations for Multiliteracies ~ Andrew’s construction and make believe play are inspired by classroom play objects, and linked to his previous experience with digital texts. Figure 28: Video Clip ~ CLICK TO PLAY:

As illustrated in A.’s “spy robot” creation, play ideas and meaning making can be seen to have “evolved” from the materials available to children (Ring, 2006, p. 74), in this case a large wooden spool and old computer keyboard. He demonstrated code-breaking skills and knowledge of computers, using letters to spell a “password to enter” on his robot’s keyboard, A. also linked this play episode to a previous “spy club” play theme – certain computer keys served specific functions for his imaginary machine (i.e., “backspace means ‘let’s get out of here!’”). A.’s play idea could also be seen to be linked to previous experiences and interest in digital literacies, as illustrated in additional data collected regarding his play and literacy experiences (i.e., Webkinz play, Internet ‘surfing’, computers in the classroom, as well as participation in electronic data review for this study), and his interest in/knowledge of virtual worlds (i.e., “Jump out of the computer, and back into the world. Back into the computer and out of the world.”).

“Surpriser!”: Reconceptualizing ‘Play’ and ‘Literacy’

Multimodal data collection and analysis grounded in multiple perspectives offered textured accounts of children at play involved in complex literate behaviour – imagining, constructing and narrating their experience of the world, as it is and as it could be (Engel, 2005; Podlozny, 2000; Roskos and Christie, 2001). In peak/authentic play activity, children were shown to be involved in creative, imaginative processes which connected with the full range of their senses, and drew upon their multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993; Gardner, 1999) – the data would suggest that play IS multiliteracies.

Multiliteracies refers to the multimodal ways which we employ to convey and construct meaning… and, in these ways, children are expert meaning makers - the lines
blur between ‘play,’ ‘literacy’ and ‘art,’ as I consider my own data collection and
interpretation processes, as well as the children’s play episodes. Drawing, sculpting,
building, experiencing digital literacies… these are all now considered “pathways to
literacy”, to representing and understanding meaning through the use of symbols (Kress,
1997). Moving beyond traditional conceptualizations of ‘literacy’ as print bound, Eisner
(2003) asserts: “Literacy itself can be thought of not as limited to what the tongue can
articulate but what the mind can grasp. Thus, in this sense, dance, music, and the visual
arts are languages through which both meaning and mind are promoted” (p. 342).
Playing and learning through the arts – visual art, dance, music, block building, writing,
sculpting – offer children multimodal ways of representing meaning, just a sampling of
“the hundred languages of children” (Edwards & Gandini, 1998).

Kress (1997) suggests “we need a different theory of language, one which treats
language as a phenomenon in continuous, dynamic change, due to the action of
individuals… in everyday life. Such a theory will treat individual speakers or writers not
as language users but as language makers” (p.xvi) “What I want to see in curriculum is
lots of opportunities for students to explore their own inquiry questions using reading,
writing, and other sign systems as tools and toys for learning” (Harste, 2003, p. 11).
Through play, children are fully engaged using many sign systems – linguistic, visual,
audio, gestural, spatial… and combining these modalities, thus moving beyond traditional
conceptualizations of language and literacy teaching and learning. Play offers multiple
ways of experiencing, representing, responding to, working through and inquiring about
ideas and the world.

The Role of Multiple Texts

Viewing play as ‘multiliteracies,’ and play episodes, themes and ideas as ‘text,’ I
considered how play was intertextually linked to other everyday texts within children’s
lives. For this particular group of children, everyday texts included websites, picture
books, illustrations, photographs, icons, legends, sports, toys, temporary tattoos, and
TV/DVDs. Further, multiple opportunities for meaning making with various sign
systems being facilitated/recognized/valued within this classroom community – children
were well supported in multimodally re-viewing, revising, re-visioning, re-considering
ideas on multiple occasions, creating excellent conditions for engaging in processes that enabled deep comprehension and meaning making.

Jacob and Michael sit across from each other at the art table during small group/visual arts activity time. Their specialist teacher had begun by sharing a non-fiction book: Where There Is No Name for Art: The Art of Tewa Pueblo Children by Bruce Hucko. During this read-aloud, the teacher responds to children’s questions and comments about the artwork and the children featured in the book – painting size, and the specific ages of the children are of particular interest. “How old is that one?” “Which one is (was painted by) the 6-year-old and which one is the 5-year-old?” and children asked many questions and commented on the printed and illustrated content, the children paying particular interest in the ages of the child artists as shown under each photograph illustration. Afterwards, as Jacob and Michael are using pastels to draw a scene, each creating images of a helicopter on paper while composing a ‘war story’ together. Star Wars seems to be the inspiration, as Jacob directs, “Put the stormtroopers in jail. I’m making the guy jump off the thing – Whooooo!” Jacob and Michael converse back and forth, imitating each other’s drawing and engaging in wordplay and sound-play. “That’s a muzzy colour,” Jacob laughs. Michael agrees, laughing, “Yeah, a muzzy colour!” “Muzzy colour.” “Muzzy colour,” they each say back and forth many times. “Buzzeeto!!” Michael exclaims, and the wordplay continues. When I ask what that word means, Michael replies, “Here’s the antennae,” while Jacob answers, “That was make the sound…the helicopter sound.” The specialist teacher checks in with each boy individually, asking about his technique, and certain characteristics of his pastel drawing. “How did you make the helicopter blades look like they’re moving?” In response, Jacob gestures with his hands. “Your gesture, back and forth, back and forth...” She also notes that Jacob and Michael were conversing together while creating their drawings. “Artists like to get ideas from each other,” she affirms.

Jacob and Michael’s Star Wars helicopter drawings, which incorporated wordplay and storytelling, acting as play partners (and a sort of conspiratorial air, in the silliness and violent play theme) is illustrative of the complexity of play and meaning making – social event, art activity, oral language, gross and fine motor activity, social-emotional pretend play, musical wordplay… this play episode could even be characterized as ‘silly
and off-task’; it was fascinating to listen to the expert visual arts teacher recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate the aesthetic dimensions of Jacob’s drawing – how the lines suggested movement, and dimension. Realizing that the boys’ wordplay – silly-sounding words that were produced simultaneously with drawing those ‘movement lines,’ at the point in the narrative when the helicopter rose and crashed, as Jacob and Michael made eye contact and laughed in response to the story and sound effects – story, visuals, sound, performance, and reader-response all happening intertwined and interdependent!
Figure 29: Play? Literacy? Art? – Jacob’s experience illustrates the complexity of multimodal meaning making.
Theme #3: “But there ARE boy things and girl things!”: Multi-Gendered Playscapes,

Dilemmas and questions around gender – gender stereotypes, gendered identities, and gendered playthings – emerged throughout data collection and analysis. As a teacher, mother and researcher, I feel a responsibility to question assumptions and resist stereotypes and simplistic explanations for gender differences. Yet, I also feel a need to acknowledge and explore difference, in empathetic ways, being sensitive to how families and cultures may value various gendered behaviour and identities. Realizing that empathy and assuming a sensitive approach are ways that I have been socialized, as a girl/woman… and as an Early Childhood Educator within a ‘feminized’ profession – but acknowledging, too, that I consider these to be strengths and useful skills in life, I tread carefully in considering how to ‘disrupt’ gendered assumptions. Indeed, these ‘feminine’ approaches served me well during this grounded theory data collection, in my efforts to empathize and put myself ‘in the skin’ of boys at play – the data did indeed ground this inquiry, as I hope to continue to inquire and wonder how to resist and reconceptualize gender in ways that expand, rather than limit, children’s possibilities.

Interpreting their comments, conversations, gestures, choices, and activities, the children communicated tension/dilemmas around:

- How playthings, names, school activities are gendered?
- How do we communicate that our play is fun, exciting and important?
- Can we be noisy, messy, and free to move about our playspace?
- How will we manage our feelings and reactions when grown-ups “ruin” our play?

Likewise, through discussion with teachers, both within the study school setting and during academic/professional conference presentation, adult dilemmas included:

- How do I respond to boys’ noise, mess and activity levels?
- What about rough and tumble play?
- What about violent, competitive and commercial play themes?
- What about ‘covering’ the curriculum, and meeting expectations?
What will other people (colleagues, principal, parents) think about my ‘letting’ boys freeplay?

Esteemed Kindergarten teacher and Early Childhood Education researcher Vivian Paley (1984) explored gendered play in *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner*, questioning “the clichés and prejudices of the teachers’ curriculum that reward girls’ domestic play while discouraging boys’ adventurous fantasies.” Teachers acknowledge that these prejudices persist, complicated by today’s curricular and achievement expectations – shopping lists in the doll corner seem justifiable, compared to Star Wars in the block area. Discussing this research project and the topic of boys’ literacy play with Vivian Paley at the 5th International Conference on Imagination and Education, she observed, with a conspiratorial tone, “We’re all afraid of the chaos, aren’t we?” Paley’s words came back to me, while sympathizing with a Community School teacher as she questioned the “spy team”, interrupting their rough and tumble play. “WHY do spies have to practice fighting? So, this is just one aspect of being spies? What else do spies do?” she attempted to keep the exasperation from her voice. Several boys answered, “They communicate with walkie talkies. They steal things,” with a tone of voice suggesting that these criteria paled in comparison to their rough and tumble play (“spy training”/fighting. Why are violent play themes, commercial texts, and rough and tumble play so appealing? What connection could they have with meaning making in the context of ‘school play?’
Figure 30: Rough and tumble play combined with role play and storying.

With “utility belts” fashioned from cardboard boxes, and fastened around their wastes with duct tape, the “spy team” began “training.” “We’re not spies yet. We’re still kids, right?” they agreed, while determining how the training would begin. Gregory was declared the “boss”, and began to roughhouse with two playmates. They proceeded to “ninja fight”, standing in aggressive-looking, wide-legged stances, kicking and pushing, sometimes just missing each other and other times connecting to hit with feet or fists. From my perspective, it seemed as though Gregory was getting ganged up on, and I wondered if it might be time to intervene? My role as ‘participant observer’ also seemed to allow me some additional time to ‘wait and see,’ as watching how it all ‘played out’ was a high priority; would I be quicker to intervene if I was acting solely as a classroom teacher? Is there a place to enter’ in role’ during a rough and tumble play-drama, as a responsible adult, or is ‘looking the other way’ the best we can do? The boys continued to wrestle and tussle, make believing that they were spies, coming out of role to ‘check in’ with each other. As others in the team looked on, the three participants emphasized that they were on the “same spy team.”
“The boss is training us, right?”

“When we’re practicing, we’re all against our boss, right?”

“The boss is the best, and we’re all against him.”

“Don’t really kick me, just pretend.”

While recording this play episode, I was reassured that the participants each saw this play as “fair”, and that there was no “real” fighting, bullying or competing happening – but I understood when a classroom teacher intervened, engaging the boys in a discussion about how else “spy team” could be played. With further observation and analysis, however, I found myself wondering if play themes or stories that seem ‘violent’ to adult eyes and ears, may be more about comradeship than actual violence. What is the difference between real violence, and pretend violence, I wondered… between actually being competitive and playing at being competitive? Can adults always tell the difference? The difference between rough & tumble play, and actual fighting… the difference between ‘playing school,’ and the ways in which we are rushing academic ‘schooling’ for young children – who is the ‘more capable partner’ here? Perhaps it’s the children who have a better grasp of the difference between fantasy and reality… illusion and delusion?

Dyson (2003) described the place of popular culture in considering contemporary childhood culture: “Popular images appeal, in part, for precisely the same reason they disconcert: they feature dominant desires and pleasures about, for example, power, wealth, and beauty, which themselves reflect interrelated societal constructions like age, gender, race and class” (p. 28). Using favourite media images in creative expression and play can be considered “textual appropriation and manipulation” (p. 31). What sort of meaning making are boys engaged in when playing with these texts and ideas? Why do adults so often feel justified in shutting it down, and what messages – about gender, about play, about school – are we communicating?

As participant observer, I added play props to the classroom learning centres in consideration of the children’s interests and play themes, as well as their interest in my technological research tools. Borrowing objects from my son’s home playthings, I added items such as a toy video camera, scrap electronics and gadgets (pedometers, wire,
headphones), various picture books, and dress-up items. My son gave his permission and also some input, offering his collection of plastic ‘Mardi Gras’ necklaces as something that the SK boys might like to use in their play – but he also felt it was necessary to offer some rationalization for the objects. He explained, “Okay, a lot of boys wear necklaces. When men and boys when MEN go to work, they need a necklace to carry their I.D.. They can’t carry it in their pocket. They have to wear it on their neck.” “And what do you like about those necklaces?” “Shiny?” he replied, laughing somewhat nervously. “Everybody likes shiny things, eh?” I suggest. “Yeah.” I was reminded of this conversation, some days later, when recording a group of SK boys playing in the Block Centre. Those same necklaces prompted the following discussion about gender…

Boys’ Things and Girly Things

Figure 31: Video Clip – CLICK TO PLAY:

Upon viewing and reviewing this discussion, I was struck by the vehemence of the boys’ debate – how loudly and emphatically they argued and discussed – the depth and texture to their inquiry, and the tension and vulnerability expressed in their dilemmas over what constitutes appropriate gendered behaviour. Play objects that I had taken for granted seem to present such dilemmas for them – jewelry, dress-up and dolls in the Dress-up Centre – the traditional home of so much Kindergarten narrative and make-believe. Toys and clothing (jewelry, shark tooth necklaces, Barbie, costumes, princess costumes, nail polish, dresses, Little Pet Shop collectibles), activities (snowboarding, skating, skateboarding, surfing), as well as boys who have “girl names” and girls who have “boy names” - the dilemma and discussion also revealed the dilemma/tensions around whether or not it is acceptable to even talk about or
consider gender as ‘difference’ – “Remember!” Gregory reminded the others, glancing at the camera. “Remember what teacher said? It’s mean to say there’s girl things and boy things.” “Yeah, but guys,” asserts Owen “There is such things.”

“When MEN go to work…”: When is Make Believe a Narrative?

A group of girls play in the Block Centre, their props including pillows, dress-up clothes as “pajamas”, masks, old cell phones, and big blocks laid out horizontally to form “beds and couches”. Alice announces that they are playing “Dogs Who Talk on Cell Phones”, and I note how even this sounds like the title to a book! As I have noted many times during the weeks of data collection, the girls’ play so often matches my conceptualization of ‘narrative,’ and the play scripts I am accustomed to reading about in professional journals and teacher books.

“Pretend I was the Mommy dog and I sharpened my paws.”

“I’m the baby poodle.”

“That’s our phone...”

“...that’s my phone...”

“No, mine was at the bottom.”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff...whine, whine, whine...” (into cell phones)

“Pretend I was both of your moms and you saw me leave!”

(Putting on mask.) “Look at mine! I’m a real doggie now.”

“Pretend you saw me as a dog, and we were sleepers.”

This sort of play narrative was easy to record and sounded so lovely to my ears, as compared to the boys’ active play episodes that I had been working to capture and analyze. This example of girls’ play characterized what I had come to think of and define as ‘narrative’ - enacted story and a largely verbal script, as most commonly documented in research literature. In contrast, much in the boys’ play episodes involved physical movement, locomotion around the classroom, and gestural communication. During
Choosing Time, boys’ play often did not quite fit with my idea of ‘narrative’ and make believe; their play did not seem to follow a story or script, but involved truncated language and wordplay – experimentation with voice, and nonsense words.

Sometimes, when I attempted to enter the play in role as a play partner, or when I tried to ‘coach’ the play along by suggesting a character or storyline, I had the impression I was ‘getting it wrong’ – the attempt ‘fell flat’ with little response or enthusiasm from the players. Instead of discussing pretend play roles, or speaking ‘in character,’ the boys often preferred to discuss the design aspects of their creations – the ways in which their props were made, and their purpose. Watching Andrew engage very seriously in the design of “a castle”, I wondered why no one ever came to live in these creations – no toy characters, no pretend king and queen, no fairy tale narrative? Andrew described the design aspects of his castle – “angles”, “structures” and “supports” – and I considered ‘play’ and ‘narrative’ from a different perspective.
Figure 32: Andrew builds a castle, his ‘narrative’ - himself in character as ‘expert builder’ rather than characters in a fairy tale story.

Being in the ‘as if’/’what if’ world, and imagining possible futures for ourselves is the essence of make believe, and I came to re-consider ‘narrative’ in the ‘personae’ that I observed the boys assuming while engaged in creative play. Dorothy Heathcote (1985) developed a socially-based system of teaching involving “a reversal of the conventional teacher-student role relationship” through which students assume the “mantle of the expert” (p. 173). This drama education approach is also viewed as “a communication system that allows learning to take place simultaneously at conceptual, personal, and
social levels” – disrupting traditional hierarchical approaches to classroom structure and teaching, where the “power of communication” and “construction of knowledge” is positioned within the social group, rather than resting with the teacher (p. 173-174).

Considered within a multiliteracies framework, “educators expand the opportunities for children to express themselves – their intelligence, imagination and linguistic and artistic talents (Cummins, 2006, p. 64). Make believe play can be viewed on a continuum of meaning making and knowledge construction through drama, and active problem-solving: “The participants create possibility, while the spectator within each participant creates and owns the knowledge arising from the combination of possibility, action, and outcome” (Heathcote, 1985, p. 180).

What might be considered less sophisticated make believe, even ‘silliness’ or ‘inattention’ – children’s active group play in all sorts of forms - may instead be characterized and recognized as identity and knowledge construction within an interdependent social framework - going from ‘Me, to You, to We.’ I do caution that while gender has offered a compelling lens through which to consider these play episodes, my intention is not to present a simplified or essentialized portrayal. Rather, I challenge us to consider how authentic teaching and learning experiences make visible children’s many languages and expressions of understanding – in the context of their various differences and similarities. Cummins (2006) suggests “optimal academic development within the interpersonal space of the learning community occurs only when there is both maximum cognitive engagement and maximum identity investment on the part of students” (p. 60). Children’s interest in popular texts and digital literacies can be viewed as intersecting with identity, holding “the power to amplify and enhance ‘peak experience’” (p. 64). These possibilities hold important implications for the play as an ontological space, the role of teachers in ‘school play,’ as well as the social and physical conditions of play and literacy learning in Kindergarten.
Chapter 5: A New Pedagogy of Play

Through the course of my doctoral studies and thesis research, documenting children’s play and literacy development in home and school contexts, I am reconceptualizing my understandings of play as meaning making… a whole brain and body creative process of re-enacting ‘what is’ and imagining ‘what if’… of constructing identities and imagining possible future selves. When watching the children, and in considering my own attitudes toward the research, the lines blurred between ‘play’ and ‘work’…. ‘play’ and ‘art’ – to be so completely engaged in activity in which we invest such ownership, meaning, and feeling. Howard Gardner (1990) contends: “Human artistry is viewed first and foremost as an activity of the mind, an activity that involves the use of and transformation of various kinds of symbols and systems of symbols.” A 21st century view of play views children as fully engaged using many sign systems – linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and combining these modalities, thus moving beyond traditional conceptualizations of language and literacy teaching and learning. Rather than a frivolous pursuit, or an early childhood activity leading children simply on through ‘steps and stages’ toward adulthood, we can conceptualize childhood play as a complex process of meaningful, social life and knowledge construction, within a continuum of lifespan play activity.

Reconceptualizing Play

Conceptualizing play as a multimodal meaning making process, allowing for children’s multiple ways of experiencing, constructing and representing knowledge, involves viewing children as competent and capable meaning makers. Studies examining the relationship between the classroom environment and children’s literacy behaviour show clearly that “learning begins with engagement, especially for young children” (Farran, Aydogan, Kang, & Lipsey, 2006, p. 265). Play has great potential for offering optimal conditions for engagement and learning. As I returned to the literature, I became more aware of ways in which my research fit with new ideas, challenging and reconceptualizing the field of early childhood education.

Within sociocultural perspectives, literacy research has developed and utilized the conceptualization of “Third Space”, a theory that recognizes and examines the ‘space between’ children’s multiple worlds (i.e., home and school) and considers ideological
differences in home and school culture vis-à-vis literacy practices (Cook, 2005b; Pahl & Kelly, 2005; Levy, 2008; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo & Callazo, 2004). Third space has been defined as:

1. a way to build bridges from knowledges and discourses often marginalised in school settings;

2. a navigational space through which to cross and succeed in different discourse communities, and;

3. a space of cultural, social and epistemological change…to challenge and reshape both academic and content literacy practices and the knowledges and discourses of youths’ everyday lives. (Moje, et al., 2004, p. 45 - 47 as cited by Levy, 2008).

Cook (2005b) explored the use of classroom ‘role play’ as a means through which to create Third Spaces between home and school. This involved incorporating pedagogical processes that support ‘unschooled’ texts, bridging between school and home discourses. These processes would involve scaffolding in ways that would support learning in a ‘home-like’ way, such as allowing for ‘mess,’ allowing access to ‘adult’ resources such as scissors, staplers and household objects, and entering play as an equal player rather than an authority figure (p. 86). Likewise, Choosing Time can be considered a Third Space in which children navigate between different ways of knowing, integrating understanding, and producing new forms of learning (p. 85).

Beyond conceptualizing play as a scaffold or support, play can be thought of as transformative, opening up a “temporary ontological space” in which one may imaginatively detach from present realities to allow:

- outside-the-box thinking;
- distance and so offering a new objectivity;
- imaginative possibilities;
- re-alignment of role, priorities, and restraints, and;
- re-weighting of ‘what matters’ (Lee Bartel, email correspondence, September 15, 2007).

Recent theory and research also views Third Space as a “particular zone of proximal development” in which processes and relationships between “social and
individual functioning” are viewed within the context of everyday experiences and mediated learning environments (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 151). Play and imaginative processes create “transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened (p. 152). As engagement is heightened, the possibility for comprehension and learning potentially deepen and expand.

**How Does Play Link to Meaning Making?**

How might this work for young children? I would suggest that a key link between play and literacy is the extent to which play offers a Third Space to acquire, develop, shape, and expand comprehension and conceptual understandings. Conceptual understanding of words has been found to improve children’s vocabulary and reading comprehension (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001), while Farran, Aydogan, Kang and Lipsey (2006) suggest that the strongest preschool literacy programs, in terms of lasting effects on educational achievement, connect to children’s experience in conceptual ways (p. 259). Observing how children connect in multiple – multi-modal, multi-sensory – ways when engaged in play provides a glimpse or clue as to how conceptual understandings and comprehension may be supported at these ‘peak’ times of engagement, as well as how social context may relate to forming identity – seeing oneself as a competent meaning maker.
Figure 33: Owen’s body mirrors the block construction that he and Andrew built collaboratively – an example of the potential of play as ‘embodied’ learning, how children may be creating conceptual understanding in integrated, multi-sensory, holistic ways.

Considering boys’ experiences as illustrative, kinesthetic learning/multi-sensory materials, and social relevance are important in providing optimal conditions for meaning making. I would suggest that highly ‘sensory’ materials be considered most worthwhile and appropriate within early childhood classrooms, and would include digital tools (e.g., computers, digital cameras, etc.) in addition to the sand, water, art, and construction materials which characterize well-equipped learning environments. Commercial texts are also, by design, multimodal and multisensory, explaining their high interest and intertextual connections to boys’ Choosing Time play themes and creations. I would suggest that by making space in the classroom for these texts and tools, we create bridges
to boys’ out-of-school experiences, and offer opportunities for meaning making, critical thinking, and learning for children and ourselves.

This examination of boys in an early childhood education setting would support and extend previous research, with school-age and adolescent boys, that found boys typically “use literacies to shape their identities and develop shared interests with friends” (Blair and Sanford, 2003). Boys’ play and other literacy experiences were often collaborative, active, and connected to how the boys saw themselves – or how they would have others view them. As expert builder, spy agent, loyal friend, superhero, designer, comedian – I continue to wonder what it means to integrate gendered images/personae with being ‘literate’… to be cool, popular, expert… brave, courageous, strong…vulnerable, expressive, emotive…smart, intelligent, wise…and literate. I would suggest that it is particularly important that our classrooms do not communicate masculinity (however defined) to be mutually exclusive or dichotomous with literacy and school play; that we work (and play!) to empathize and understand the tensions around what it means to make sense of ‘boys things and girly things.’
Figure 34: The importance of social context ~ Andrew and John collaborate to build a “joke”; interconnecting blocks mirror their interconnected bodies, reflecting the closeness and collaborative intent of these play partners.

Imagining and re-imagining ourselves, as teachers, also seems important. “When teachers are able to learn the literacies of the sign systems and understand how semiotic systems of meaning work, they are better able to see how they can use the concept of semiotic systems in their classroom practice” (Albers, 2001, p. 7). I would agree with Albers, hoping that students and teachers alike are allowed and enabled to direct their own inquiry in multimodal, artistic ways, as I have been privileged enough to do throughout the course of this thesis study. Through this research, I came to better understand and enjoy meaning making through digital technologies - photography and
digital composition of print and visual texts – and to consider children as competent and capable meaning makers and agentive researchers. Viewing play from multiple perspectives, with multiple lenses, I was able to engage in the process of reconceptualizing early childhood theory and practice.

**Child Development**

Reconceptualist work in the field of early childhood education questions dominant psychological and child development theory, and involves rethinking assumptions about children and childhood, with an aim to impact and transform teaching practice (Bernhard, 2002; Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007; Swadener & Canella, 2007). Viewing child development as a universal, linear, ‘one-size fits all’ theoretical model is thought to skew our vision of human growth and development, overlooking variation and allowing dominant cultural assumptions to dictate a normal or “usual developmental pathway” (Bernhard, 2002, p. 3). Reconceptualising our understandings of childhood, to move away from a vision of children climbing the ‘steps and stages’ of a developmental ladder involves multiple perspectives and a revisioning of children’s developmental pathways, as described by Bernhard (2002):

> If we envision a tree whose interwoven branches represent different developmental pathways; a whole range of paths can be considered normal. The branchings of the tree are not predictable in terms of individual psychology. There are so many possible contextual factors that we cannot know how a person will end up. At moments of branching, the most subtle contextual factors may play a key role. (p. 13)

Significantly, recognizing developmental processes as complex and varied - conceptualized as “multiple paths” - opens up space to consider not just varied processes of development, but **varied outcomes** as indicators of success (p. 11). Admittedly, this paradigm shift could prove challenging to North American educators, many of whom are working in socio-political contexts that involve ‘accountability,’ standardized outcomes, and high stakes testing, within a field of early childhood education that remains an underfunded patchwork of services (Cameron, 2006; LaPierre, 1983; McCain &Mustard, 1999; OECD, 2004; Paschal, 2009). Yet, the spotlight on the importance of early years learning and initiatives in full-day Kindergarten for 4- and 5-year olds hold potential peril and promise for play in 21st century schools. Play-full approaches offer optimal
conditions of living and learning, potentially extending through childhood and adulthood rather than ending during the early years.

**School Play**

Successful early childhood education is conceptualized more holistically in Nordic countries as compared to North American models, which increasingly focus on academic outcomes (e.g., pre-determined reading levels) for young children. While North American kindergartens and preschools experience a ‘push-down’ of primary school curriculum, Nordic countries offer an alternate vision, in both teacher training and educational policy. With specialized training and education in child development and theories of attachment, these kindergarten teachers are supported and recognized for their contributions toward healthy and happy childhoods.

In Finland a kindergarten teachers’ profession includes the roles of a teacher and a professional caregiver providing both emotional and physical caregiving…consequently, kindergarten teachers hold and acquire personal practical knowledge about not only teaching and learning but also about caregiving and being cared for. (Horppu and Ikonen-Varilla, 2004, p. 231)

Scandinavia and Finland, achieving some of the world’s highest literacy rates, have historically recognized the value of play in early childhood education in both policy and practice. In recent years, Swedish preschool and elementary school systems have modified school curriculum to more fully integrate play with other learning activities – establishing partnerships between preschool and elementary teachers, use of mixed-age learning groups and activities that integrate play and learning (Baumer, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2005; Lindqvist, 1995, 2001). Following Sweden’s example, other countries - New Zealand, Spain, England and Scotland - have shifted to a ‘lifelong learning’ approach, coordinating ‘preschool’ and ‘school-aged’ education (Colley, 2006).

Likewise, the Community School extends **Choosing Time** throughout the grade levels, extending to Grade 6 (12 years of age). Discussion with families, during home visits, revealed that parents valued **Choosing Time** as a unique and compelling part of their children’s school program. Kindergarten parents who also had older siblings enrolled at the school were particularly articulate around these points in interviews, prompting implications for future research. What role does play have in the learning
within the upper grades at the Community School? Having engaged in years of school play, how would current Grade 4 or Grade 6 students conceptualize the role of play in their learning processes? What new perspectives might these study participants (kindergarteners in 2007) have in a few years, reviewing this study data and considering their ‘kindergarten selves?’

In the context of my own kidwatching, I have observed that children’s interest and engagement in make believe is sustained rather than diminishing after the early years (ages 3-5); when children are allowed time, space, and freedom, make believe play continues to be an activity of choice. Likewise, some play research has provided surprising results, finding that make believe extends to middle childhood rather diminishing after kindergarten. A longitudinal study of school-aged children followed up with those who had had ‘imaginary friends’ and been previously studied as preschoolers. When questioned on how their imaginary companion had disappeared or ‘ended,’ researchers were surprised to find that nearly half the children admitted that they still engaged in this imaginative play, though secretly (Pearson, Rouse, Doswell, Ainsworth, Dawson, Simms, Edwards, & Faulconbridge, 2001). How else might play be finding its way into the busy lives of school-aged children?

**Play as a Lifespan Activity**

Research would also indicate that, similar to childhood play, adults engage in pretend activity with “the same goal of learning about and making sense of their experience” (Goncu & Perone, 2005, p. 141). At its most profound, perhaps, adults have been documented engaged in imaginary conversations at the gravesites of loved ones, “enabling the grieving survivors to reinterpret their joint past with the deceased as they also helped them prepare for the future” (p. 141-142). Imagining ‘as if,’ ‘what if’ scenarios… imagining possible future (or past?) selves… how could our childhood play experiences extend to help us through life’s most difficult and trying moments, to imagine other possibilities and outcomes? To cope with change?

David Elkind (2007) suggested play to be “a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels” (p. 4). He described ‘play,’ ‘love,’ and ‘work’ as three essential human dispositions, each taking a prominent role during progressive stages of development, with play emphasized in early childhood,
work in middle childhood, and love in adolescence – but each supporting and contributing to the experience of the others. While play, love, and work are considered to become “fully separate” in adulthood, it is most interesting to consider those conditions in which “sometimes all of us appreciate play, love, and work as a single, joyful experience” (p. 5). Describing this state as optimal human experience, Milhaly Csikszentmihaly (1997) suggested that we are in “flow” when “fully involved in meeting a challenge, solving a problem, discovering something new”, when we have “clear goals, clear rules, immediate feedback” within a context that “encourages concentration, prevents distractions, allows a variable amount of control” (p. 59, 66). His research revealed that those in “highly individualized professions”, or what Richard Florida (2002) described as the ‘creative class,’ experience work and leisure as “completely integrated with the rest of their lives” (p. 61). For people who are free to set their own goals and determine the level of challenge/difficulty of their tasks, “flow is a constant part of their professional activity” (p. 61). Considering flow in the context of teacher autonomy and working/teaching conditions would provide an interesting topic for future research: What conditions of teaching allow for optimal teaching/learning experience?

**Implications for Further Research**

Considering other further research questions and inquiry, I would wonder and questions the Third Spaces between ‘home play,’ ‘school play,’ and ‘outdoor play.’ While educational and child health experts consider how play is dwindling from the lives of today’s children, I was interested in hearing how Community School families were innovatively using time and space for home and community play. Families reported outdoor community dinners – pizza parties, skating parties – that provided a neighbourhood social occasion, a break from household routine, and a ‘safe’ way for children to gather together in a public space. Additionally, one family described how their downtown urban neighbourhood changed ‘after hours,’ with areas that were full of commuters and ‘business people’ through the week providing ‘tricycle space’ on weekends. How else might families be fitting play into their home lives in ways that are similar and different to past generations? How might this vary within our diverse communities, and relate to socio-economic status?
Figure 35: 1-year old Juliette singing a song with her father and a long distance family member, via videoconference. How else might traditional ‘home play’ intersect with digital technologies?

As with diminishing play opportunities, digital technologies and screen time are commonly viewed as increasingly intrusive and as posing a risk to young children (Alliance for Childhood, 2004; Kaiser Foundation, 2005). Early childhood educators commonly privilege traditional playthings and picture books over commercial texts and digital literacies; we may even consider this a hallmark of our quality and professionalism as educators. My experiences and research have brought me to question these positions and practices. Considering how children’s school play and creations were so often intertextually linked to out-of-school, digital, and commercial texts, I have come to question adults’ fear or dismissal of these high interest texts. My own assumptions were challenged by the rich conversation and playful interaction that was evident as children gathered around my laptop, decorating it with small toys, or building block structures for my digital research tools. Further research would examine how teachers are including commercial and digital texts in engaging and critical ways within early childhood environments, as well as considering what we have to learn from family ‘home play’ with digital tools and texts.
Further inquiry questions also emerged from conversations with Community School teachers, and we continue to meet, discuss and inquire:

- Any time you interrupt play what happens to it? Does it just pickup where it left off? Or does it change? Or does it stop?
- Is there really such thing as ‘freeplay?’ At school, at home, in the play-yard, at the park – wherever a child is playing, there is always some limit, some boundary, some deliberateness, set by adults; there is always something that WE have provided for them…

Inspired by some recent ‘email conversation,’ in which we were discussing the defining elements of Choosing Time, the Community School teachers questioned their current group of children as to why it was important for them to be able to make their own choices at play time. We feel compelled to share their responses:

- **Because we want to play with our friends our own way**
- **Choosing Time is only for the kids**
- **We get to decide the rules**
• We can go anywhere we want
• You made it so that means you are a good teacher
• I like to see what my friend decides and then I decide
• Sometimes I try a new thing
• If you need a teacher you just have to ask
• No one is the boss of us
• I wish I had a Community School at my home.

Figure 37: Boys sharing superhero picture books, appearing to feel ‘at home’ at school.
References


Appendices

Appendix A

**Block Centre**
- unit and hollow blocks, ramps, wooden arches, natural wood and stumps, large spools, and wooden planks
- labeled baskets contain cars, trucks, farm animals, sea creatures, wild animals
- large trucks and
- pretend play props include an assortment of hats, toy tools, tape measures, and real-life (though inactivated) gadgets such as computer keyboards, cell phones, pedometers, joy sticks, flashlights, headphones
- construction toys, including gears, linking blocks, bristle blocks
- pillows and blankets

**Art and Writing Centres**
- cardboard, paper plates, sheet paper of all sorts, notebooks
- glue, cellophane tape, duct tape, and string
- ‘beautiful junk’, including small- and medium-sized boxes of all sorts, paper tubes, yogurt containers
- ‘arts and crafts’ materials such as popsicle sticks, pom poms, pipe cleaners, felt, feathers, ribbons, yarn
- pencils, markers, pastels, pens, paint
- foam alphabet letters, magnet alphabet letters

**Dress-up Centre**
- house play furniture, including table and chairs
- wall mirror
- dress-up clothes, including vests, animal masks (made of soft cloth), necklaces, bracelets, lanyards, handkerchiefs/bandanas
- plastic food, dishes, pots and pans

**Puzzles and Games Centre**
- puzzles
• lotto games, matching games

**Book Centre**

• shelved books included books of various genres – fiction, non-fiction, alphabet books, easy-to-read chapter books

• selections included award-winning children’s literature, and high-interest popular culture texts (i.e., The Dangerous Book for Boys, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Sinking of the Titanic)

• small basket of leveled readers

**Sand and Water Play Centre**

• Sand, large rocks and water

• Pitchers, shovels, ladles

• Toys including, wild animals and sea creatures

• Brooms, dustpans and towels
Appendix B

Letter of Participation and Consent Surveys

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Consent Letter to Principal

December 2007

Dear __________:

I am writing as a Ph.D. candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) to invite your school to participate in an upcoming research project. The aim of this project is to examine: What is the influence of boys’ play on literacy development? This research study is part of a doctoral thesis program in the Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development Program in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/UT, and will be supervised by Dr. Linda Cameron. The proposed study has undergone an ethical review process and has been judged to meet the institutional ethical standards of the University of Toronto. I now seek your permission and consent to conduct this research in your school, and invite your kindergarten teachers, families and children to be partners in this research.

The purpose of this study is to observe and analyze classroom freeplay in a kindergarten classroom, considering how boys’ play influences literacy development. This work will contribute to the on-going discussion of the nature of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, the role of gender in literacy development, and connections between play and multiliteracies. Having toured your school and considering its philosophy, as well as my supervisor’s recommendation, ________ has been suggested as an excellent site for this research. Particularly, this project would be well supported by the provision of extended periods of child-initiated freeplay in your kindergarten program, and the emphasis on ‘community’ that is highlighted in your school’s philosophy statement. I would like to ask the kindergarten teachers, children and their parents/guardians to participate in this study in the Winter Term 2007/08.

The project will be initiated by a meeting with teachers, to offer information and gain their consent, and to gain their consultation. My supervisor and I will offer teachers and families an educational workshop on the topic of “Play and Literacy”; I will also be requesting parents to complete a 10-minute questionnaire regarding their family’s home play and literacy experiences, which will be kept confidential. With parents'/guardians’ consent and teachers’ support and input, the children will also be informed of the project in age-appropriate ways, and periodically invited to offer questions, perspectives and input.

The kindergarten classroom will be observed daily for 6 weeks, during classroom freeplay time, through the use of documentation - note-taking, digital photography and videotaping, as well as collection of artifacts. The classroom environment and teaching methods will be observed and considered in relation to the ‘conditions of learning’ which are established during classroom play. Overall classroom play will be observed, with observations focusing on the play experiences of Senior Kindergarten boys; these boys’ families will also be invited to participate in a home visit/informal interview regarding the boys’ play and literacy experiences. During these six weeks, the classroom observational data can be made available to teachers for the purpose of curriculum planning and program evaluation. The teachers will be interviewed on 3-6 occasions for approximately 30 minutes, at times convenient to them, regarding classroom teaching philosophy and approaches; as well, I will invite teacher response to my analysis of the observational data. I will audio-record the interviews, in order to transcribe them; the teachers will have the opportunity to make amendments or deletions to transcribed interview text.
Upon completion of the data collection, a summary report will be offered to families by way of a ‘celebration’ to be planned in consultation with the teachers and children.

Participation in this research project is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences attached to either declining to participate, or withdrawing from participation in the study at any time. In addition to being used as thesis research, the results of the data may be used in future presentations and publications in education. In order to protect confidentiality, names of the school, teacher and children will not be listed in any part of the report. All data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and destroyed by shredding paper materials and erasing digital materials after my thesis defence, unless further written consent/approval is obtained from participants. My supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron and I will be the only two people with access to the raw data.

If you agree to allow your teachers and families to participate, please sign the attached consent form. If you have any questions, please contact me at 416-________ or kbezaire@oise.utoronto.ca, or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron, at 416 _______. Further, the Ethics Review Office of the University of Toronto may be contacted at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-_______ for questions regarding the rights of participants.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Kimberly Bezaire
Response Form

Attention Kimberly Bezaire, Ph.D. Candidate, OISE/UT:

I have read your letter, describing the thesis research you intend to undertake in my school. I understand that additional permission to collect data will be obtained from teachers and families, and that assent will be requested from the children. I give Kimberly Bezaire, Ph.D. Candidate from OISE/UT, permission to use the following methods to collect research data from the classroom (please check the following):

_____ Participatory observation and note-taking within the kindergarten classroom during freeplay.

_____ Digital photography during kindergarten classroom freeplay.

_____ Videotaping during kindergarten classroom freeplay.

_____ Collection of artifacts (e.g., children’s drawing, sketching, writing samples).

_____ Audio-recording during 3-6 interviews with teachers, at convenient times (approximately 30 minutes, each time).

_____ Collection of data from parents/guardians using a 10-minute questionnaire.

_____ Collection of data from parents/guardians through note-taking following informal home visits.

I understand that:

- This research project is part of your doctoral thesis at OISE/UT.
- The research focus is designed to observe and analyze classroom freeplay in a kindergarten classroom, considering how boys’ play influences literacy development.
- The Kindergarten teachers, children and parents/guardians are needed for this study.
- The time required for this research project is from December 2007 to March 2008.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time.
- All data collected from this research will be shredded (with the exception of classroom artifacts) and erased at the end of the study, unless further written consent/approval is obtained from participants.

____________________________
School Name

____________________________
Principal’s Name (Please print)
Please keep one copy of this form for your own reference, and return the second copy in the enclosed envelope. I thank you for your support.
December 2007

Dear ____________:

You are invited to an Information Session for Teachers, regarding a proposed study on the topic of boys’ play and literacy in Kindergarten. This research study is part of my doctoral thesis program in the Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development Program in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/UT, and is supervised by Dr. Linda Cameron. Considering the provision of extended periods of child-initiated freeplay in your Kindergarten program, and the emphasis on ‘community’ that is highlighted in your school’s philosophy statement, ___________ school is considered as a possibly excellent research site. We would like to offer information and ask you to consider participating; your school principal has been informed and given permission for this session to be held on _______________, at ___ pm/am, in Rm. ________.

At this session I will introduce you and your colleagues to the study’s background, aims and proposed methods, as well as invite your insights, input and inquiry regarding the topic of boys’ play and literacy in Kindergarten. I look forward to meeting you, to explore this topic and the possibility of collaboration. If you are interested, but not able to attend this session, or have any other questions, I can be contacted at 416-_______ or via email at: kbezaire@oise.utoronto.ca

Sincerely,
Kimberly Bezaire
Ph.D. Candidate
Consent Letter to Teacher

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
Of the University of Toronto

December 2007

Dear __________:

I am writing as a follow-up to our meeting on ___________, during which we explored the topic of boys’ play and literacy, as well as the possibility of conducting research study with you in your Kindergarten classroom. As outlined in that meeting, the aim of this project is to examine: What is the influence of boys’ play on literacy development? This research study is part of the doctoral thesis program in the Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development Program in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/UT, and will be supervised by Dr. Linda Cameron. The proposed study has undergone an ethical review process and has been judged to meet the institutional ethical standards of the University of Toronto. I now seek your formal permission and consent to conduct this research in your classroom, and collaboratively work with you to engage families and children as partners in this research.

As we’ve discussed, the purpose of this study is to observe and analyze classroom freeplay in a kindergarten classroom, considering how boys’ play influences literacy development. This work will contribute to the on-going discussion of the nature of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, the role of gender in literacy development, and connections between play and multiliteracies.

As a teacher participant in this research, your input, insight and inquiry are most welcome as the study is planned and proceeds. Your knowledge of the children, the quality of the teaching and learning environment you provide at __________, and your experience in the matters of play-based learning during the early years of schooling is valuable in informing the research process. This includes, but is not limited to, consulting with you as to the most appropriate times and ways in which to collect data, so as to be the least disruptive to classroom routine; how best to consult and communicate with families and children, so as to positively contribute to the classroom learning community; and ‘checking in’ with you for your insights/feedback regarding the trends and patterns of play and learning which are being recorded and analyzed within the study data.

With teacher input and consultation, we hope to conduct this study over the Winter term of 2007/08 and suggest that the study proceed in the following manner. Initially, my supervisor and I will offer teachers and families an evening workshop on the topic of “Play and Literacy”; I will also be requesting parents to complete a 10-minute questionnaire regarding their family’s home play and literacy experiences, which will be kept confidential. With parents’/guardians’ consent and teachers’ support and input, the children will also be informed of the project in age-appropriate ways, and periodically invited to offer questions, perspectives and input. I will observe the kindergarten classroom daily for 6 weeks, during classroom freeplay time, gathering data through the use of documentation - note-taking, digital photography and videotaping, as well as collection of artifacts. The classroom environment and teaching methods will be observed and considered in relation to the ‘conditions of learning’ which are established during classroom play. Overall classroom play will be observed, with observations focusing on the play experiences of Senior Kindergarten boys; these boys’ families will also be invited to participate in a home visit/informal interview regarding the boys’ play and literacy experiences.

During these six weeks, the classroom observational data can be made available to you for the purpose of curriculum planning and program evaluation. Also, I intend to interview you on 3-6 occasions for approximately 30 minutes, at times convenient to you, regarding your classroom teaching philosophy and approaches; as well, I will invite your response to my analysis of the observational data. These interviews
will be audio-recorded, in order to transcribe them; you will have the opportunity to make amendments or deletions to transcribed interview text.

Upon completion of the data collection, a summary report will be offered to families by way of a ‘celebration’ to be planned in consultation with teachers and children. A slide show or a homemade book, including photos of the children at play, are possible examples of this celebratory report; I am interested in your perspective and suggestions.

Participation in this research project is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences attached to either declining to participate, or withdrawing from participation in the study at any time. In addition to being used as thesis research, the results of the data may be used in future presentations and publications in education. In order to protect confidentiality, names of the school, teachers and children will not be listed in any part of the report. All data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and destroyed by shredding paper materials and erasing digital materials after my thesis defence, unless further written consent/approval is obtained from participants. My supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron and I will be the only two people with access to the raw data.

If you agree to participate, please sign the attached consent form. If you have any questions, please contact me at 416-_______ or kbezaire@oise.utoronto.ca, or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron, at 416_______. Further, the Ethics Review Office of the University of Toronto may be contacted at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-_______. for questions regarding the rights of participants.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Kimberly Bezaire
Teacher Response Form

To Kimberly Bezaire, Ph.D. Candidate, OISE/UT:

I have read your letter, describing the thesis research you intend to undertake in my school. I agree to participate in the research project. Please check the following:

- Participatory observation and note-taking within the kindergarten classroom during freeplay.
- Digital photography during kindergarten classroom freeplay.
- Videotaping during kindergarten classroom freeplay.
- Collection of artifacts (e.g., children’s drawing, sketching, writing samples)
- Audio-recording during 3-6 interviews with teachers, at convenient times (approximately 30 minutes, each time).
- Collection of data from parents/guardians using a 10-minute questionnaire
- Collection of data from parents/guardians through note-taking following informal home visits.

I understand that:

- This research project is part of your doctoral thesis at OISE/UT.
- The research focus is designed to observe and analyze classroom freeplay in a kindergarten classroom, considering how boys’ play influences literacy development.
- The time required for this research project is from December 2007 to March 2008.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time.
- All data collected from this research will be shredded (with the exception of classroom artifacts) and erased at the end of the study, unless further written consent/approval is obtained from participants.

____________________________
School Name

____________________________
Name (please print)

____________________________
Signature          _____________________
                    Date

Please keep one copy of this form for your own reference, and return the second copy in the enclosed envelope. I thank you for your support.
Letter of Participation and Consent Surveys

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
Of the University of Toronto

December 2007
Dear Parent/Legal Guardian:

I am writing as a Ph.D. candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) to invite your school to participate in an upcoming research project. The aim of this project is to examine: What is the influence of boys’ play on literacy development? This research study is part of a doctoral thesis program in the Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development Program in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/UT. This study has undergone an ethical review process and has been judged to meet the institutional ethical standards of the University of Toronto. As well, your school principal, (Principal’s name) and your son’s/daughter’s teachers, (Kindergarten teachers’ names) have given permission for this project to be conducted in the Kindergarten classroom. I am writing for your approval of your child’s participation in the project. As well, I am inviting your participation in this research process because as your child’s ‘first teacher’, your input and perspective add important context. I would greatly appreciate if you and your child could participate in this study over the Winter term of 2007/08.

The purpose of this study is to observe and analyze classroom freeplay in a kindergarten classroom, considering how boys’ play influences literacy development. This work will contribute to the on-going discussion of the nature of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, the role of gender in literacy development, and connections between play and multiliteracies. While this is a study of boys’ play, it is important to include and consider girls, too. The classroom environment and community will be considered, as a whole, in this study, and girls’ involvement and social interaction in boys’ play may be found to be influential. Though girls’ experiences are not the focus of this study, its results may potentially offer implications for future research in gender studies.

This project will begin with a workshop for teachers and families on the topic of “Play and Literacy”, provided by my supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron, and myself. I will also be requesting parents to complete a 10-minute questionnaire regarding their family’s home play and literacy experiences, which will be kept confidential. With parents’/guardians’ consent and teachers’ support and input, the children will also be informed of the project in age-appropriate ways, and periodically invited to offer questions, perspectives and input. I will observe the kindergarten classroom daily for 6 weeks, during classroom freeplay time, gathering data through the use of documentation - note-taking, digital photography and videotaping, as well as collection of artifacts. Overall classroom play will be observed, with observations focusing on the play experiences of Senior Kindergarten boys; these boys’ families will also be invited to participate in a home visit/informal interview regarding the boys’ play and literacy experiences. Although Senior Kindergarten boys will offer a focus of study for researcher analysis, the classroom observation and discussion times will be conducted inclusively so that all participating children share in the experience and do not feel ‘left out’; also, the involvement of all participants truly adds valuable context to the study. During these weeks of observation, the documentation will be available to classroom teachers for the purpose of curriculum planning and program evaluation.

Upon completion of the data collection, a summary report will be offered to families by way of a ‘celebration’ to be planned in consultation with teachers and children.

Participation in this research project is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences attached to either declining to participate, or withdrawing from participation in the study at any time. The results of the data may be used in future presentations and publications in education. In order to protect
confidentiality, names of the school, teachers and children will not be listed in any part of the thesis report. All data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and destroyed by shredding paper materials and erasing tapes at the completion of my thesis research, unless further written consent/approval is obtained from participants. Your family may withdraw from this project at any time. My supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron, and I will be the only two people with access to the raw data.

If you agree to have your son/daughter participate in this research project, please complete the consent form and return it to your child’s classroom teacher. If you have any questions, please contact me at 416-_______ or kbezaire@oise.utoronto.ca, or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Linda Cameron of OISE/UT at 416 _______. Further, the Ethics Review Office of the University of Toronto may be contacted at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-_______ for questions regarding the rights of participants.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Kimberly Bezaire
Parent/Guardian Response Form

To Kimberly Bezaire, Ph.D. Candidate, OISE/UT:

I have read your letter, describing the thesis research you intend to undertake in my child’s school. I agree to allow my child, ___________________, to participate in the research project.

(Child’s name)

Please check the following:

_____ Participatory observation and note-taking within the kindergarten classroom during freeplay.

_____ Digital photography during kindergarten classroom freeplay.

_____ Videotaping during kindergarten classroom freeplay.

_____ Collection of artifacts (e.g., children’s drawing, sketching, writing samples).

I, _____________________, also agree to participate in the research project. Please check the following:

(Your name)

_____ Completion of a 10-minute questionnaire regarding my family’s home play and literacy experiences.

_____ Collection of data from parents/guardians through note-taking following an informal home visit (if applicable).

I understand that:

- This research project is part of your doctoral thesis at OISE/UT.
- The research focus is designed to observe and analyze classroom freeplay in a kindergarten classroom, considering how boys’ play influences literacy development.
- The time required for this research project is from December 2007 to March 2008.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time.
- All data collected from this research will be shredded (with the exception of classroom artifacts) and erased at the end of the study, unless further written consent/approval is obtained from participants.

____________________________
School Name

____________________________
Name (please print)

___________________________     _____________________
Signature        Date

Please keep one copy of this form for your own reference, and return the second copy in the enclosed envelope. I thank you for your support.
Consent Form for Publication

I, (print name) _______________________________, parent/guardian of (child’s name) _______________________________ agree to allow photographic and/or digital video images of my child to be used for the purposes of academic publication. These publications may include printed or electronic publications, as well as academic conference presentation.

I have seen and reviewed the material to be published and/or presented. I have discussed this consent form with Kimberly Bezaire and Dr. Linda Cameron, who are authors of this publication.

My child’s name will not be published, and as far as possible all identifying features will be removed. However, it is not possible to ensure complete anonymity.

________________________________________
Date

________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian

________________________________________
Address

________________________________________
City, Province, Postal Code

Please keep one copy of this form for your own reference, and return the second copy in the enclosed envelope.
Appendix C

Kimberly Bezaire and Linda Cameron
OISE/University of Toronto

On-Line Resources and Information

Alliance for Childhood. Available at: http://www.allianceforchildhood.net

American Academy of Pediatrics (October 9, 2006). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. Available at: http://www.aap.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf


International Play Association. The child’s right to play. Available at: http://www.ipacanada.org/home_childs.htm

Books for Teachers and Parents

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv

The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children by David Elkind

Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How Our Children Really Learn - Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

A Child’s Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play by Vivian Gussin Paley

Lifelong Play and Creativity

The Play Ethic by Pat Kane

Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi