

ENRICHING STUDENTS' ORAL LANGUAGE
THROUGH ACTIVE PLAY

by

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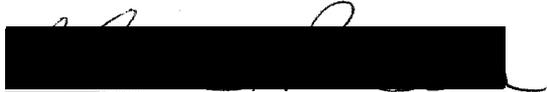
ENRICHING ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH ACTIVE PLAY

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CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled ENRICHING STUDENTS' ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH ACTIVE PLAY by Kristine M. Beringer, Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science in Education, Literacy Birth – Grade 6, is acceptable in form and content and demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.



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Abstract

The purpose of this Master's Thesis Project was to identify the relationship between active play and oral language development and create the Professional Development Project: ENRICHING STUDENTS' ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACTIVE PLAY. The Professional Development Workshop provided teachers with the tools to implement a play-based curriculum and with activities to use in their classroom. A literature review was conducted and the aspects that were explored included the relationship between play and oral language development, what a play-rich environment includes and how it can be implemented into the school curriculum to promote language development. The findings indicated that play and language and cognitive development are intimately linked.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand.”

- Chinese Proverb

The purpose of this study, and resulting professional development program, focused on socioconstructivist and play theorist pedagogy and it manifests in the importance of play in the learning and development of oral language of young students and how educators utilize active play in the curriculum. With the increasing pressures and expectations being placed on children each year, it is easy to forget how important active play is to young children’s cognitive development. Each year, students are being subjected to more and more diagnostic testing. Providing active play helps promote children’s social, emotional, and cognitive growth. By eliminating the amount of time spent on playing or recess, students often leaving school feeling stressed, exhausted, and overwhelmed (Assaf, 2008). On Mar. 14, 2002, the *Sacramento Bee* reported that "test-related jitters, especially among young students, are so common that the Stanford-9 exam comes with instructions on what to do with a test booklet in case a student vomits on it" (Ohanian, 2002, p. 1). “Officials in many school districts indicate that it is the new emphasis on high-stakes testing is to blame for dwindling recess time” (Henley et al, 2007, p. 57).

This growing trend not only concerns educators, but parents as well are becoming increasingly concerned. The Cartoon Network and the National PTA have implemented a “Rescuing Recess” campaign. As quoted in NASPA (National Association for Sports and Physical Activity):

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“Without any question, the number one barrier to physical activity in schools is the perception that time spent in activities such as physical education and recess will undermine academic learning. The evidence does not support this assumption. We now know that making time for physical education and physical activity does not reduce academic learning and it may actually increase it”

(Henley et. al, 2007, p. 58).

Recess is a time where students can participate in active play, and during these times, students can develop their oral language skills. As an educator, this topic is important to me because I see the importance of play and the influence it has on student’s oral language development. Another reason I chose to focus on play and its impact on oral language development is my literacy background. I am currently pursuing my certification in Literacy for grades birth through sixth, and I understand the importance of play in school curriculum.

Theoretical Stance: Socioconstructivism and Play Theory

While socioconstructivism and play theorists are not new to academia, they have opened a new perspective on learning and renewed application in schooling in the 21st century. Even though they are complex and varied theoretical perspectives, socioconstructivism and play theories continue to be prominent learning theories and practice in education (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2000). Hill (2010) states that play and recess offer children the necessary skills that they will need to be successful in their schooling such as memory, oral language development and engagement in literacy events. Play also provides students with social and emotional

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competence, affiliation, creativity, and cognitive development and is a great opportunity to monitor these developments. By incorporating play into the academic curriculum children can benefit socially and increase their oral language and cognitive development and in turn improve prepare them for the academic demands they will face throughout school.

Play is not just a recreational activity; it is a very important part of childhood. “As early as 1959, the United Nations asserted in its Declaration of Rights of the Child that play is a basic right alongside other rights such as adequate nutrition, housing, health care and education. Play is the way that children explore, learn and develop” (Mistrett & Bickart, 2009, p. 19). Mistrett and Bickart (2009) explain that when children are engaging themselves in more complex fantasy play, they are using language to act out play situations. When children are playing or pretending, they use more words in general, use future and past tense verbs and more descriptive words with other children. An important indicator of future academic success is children’s ability to talk about other times and places. Children build literacy skills when they incorporate themes or characters in fantasy play.

Piaget: The Development of Play

From a socioconstructivist viewpoint, knowledge is not “simply acquired by accumulating information from the environment, or even copying the behavior of others, but is based on what the individual child brings to each situation” (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999, p.23). Jean Piaget viewed the growth of cognition as one area of development which the role of play in constructing knowledge is most clearly articulated. Piaget created a model of the development of thinking that incorporates both of the following aspects of adaptation:

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1. Changing the environment to meet ones needs and
2. Changing oneself to meet the demands of the environment (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999).

Through this model, Piaget posits an interactive process between these two aspects of adaptation, which he calls assimilation and accommodation. He considers this interaction to be the source of development and learning (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999).

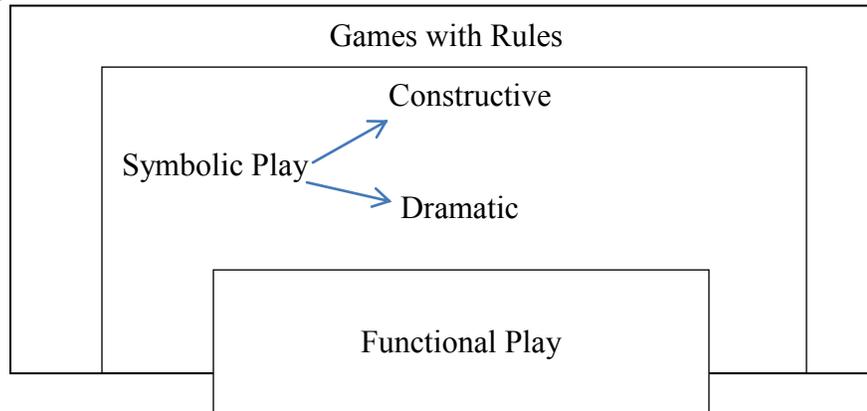
In assimilation, “new elements of experience are incorporated into existing structures of thought” (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999, p.24). More importantly, these elements are transformed by the individual student’s thinking process to fit into the structure of that individual’s thinking (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). In Piaget’s theory, accommodation allows the structure of our thinking to change when it serves us in adapting to new experiences. It is the processes through “which new schemes or mental patters for potential behavior are created, or existing patterns are stretched and changed in form in order to incorporate new information. Accommodation allows us to meet challenges presented by the environment...” (p.25). According to Piaget, there is constant interaction between these processes. In the early childhood years, assimilative and accommodative processes are constantly fluctuating. Because of this constant changing nature of the student’s emerging concepts, young student’s behavior is largely governed by play, or a predominance of assimilation. What is essential, is that play and assimilation emphasize the student’s interests and current structures of thinking as the source of development (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999).

Piaget’s theory is intimately tied to the study of play. Several of his important works are filled with observations of his own three children at play during their first years of life. His work

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Play, Dreams and Imitation made play an integral part of his theory. Below is a figure of Piaget's Stages of the Development of Play (Figure 1) (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999).

Figure 1.1



Practice or Functional Play. Piaget (1962) described practice or functional play as “a happy display of known actions” (p. 28) in which children repeatedly practice their schemes for actions with objects or their known bodies. Practice or functional play is exemplified by the “play as an infant, grasping and pulling, kicking and propelling of the arms that infants engage in for the pleasure of mastering movement” (p. 28). Practice play continues as children grow and participate in activities like splashing water or sifting through sand. It is a major form of activity throughout childhood and adulthood. Opportunities for practice or functional play are an important source of development and pleasure throughout life and provide a necessary feature of school curriculums (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999).

Symbolic Play

The second stage of Piaget's (1962) play theory is symbolic play and it begins by 18 months of age and plays a key role in the stage of pre-operational intelligence (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). Symbolic play includes the use of mental representation to

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signify that one object represents another in play, or to take on a make-believe role in play.

Symbolic play “forms a foundation of future abstract thinking and the ability to organize both work and play experiences as human beings develop” (p. 29). There are three major forms of symbolic play as described by Piaget:

1. constructive
2. dramatic
3. games with rules

Constructive play provides a natural link between functional play and more “sophisticated” forms of symbolic play. During constructive play, children use more concrete objects to represent an object. Typical examples are blocks or Play-Doh to represent buildings are typical examples (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). The goal in constructive play is to “approach one’s mental representation of the symbolized object as closely as possible” (p.29).

Closely related to constructive play is dramatic which often overlaps constructive play. Dramatic play involves the creation of imaginary roles and situations, and frequently accompanies the construction of pretend objects, but the representation is more abstract (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). For example, instead of using “simple object symbols, children use the gesture and language to create imaginary roles and situations with complex themes, characters, and scripts” (p. 29). This type of play can be sociodramatic in nature, meaning that it involves the negotiation of roles and pretend themes with others. Dramatic play can also be solitary, with characters, themes, and situations enacted by a single child (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). The mastery of these stages sets the stage for games

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with rules play, which children usually begin using around age five or six, and continues as the main form of overt play throughout middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Overt play is an important concept because older children and adults continually engage in constructive and dramatic play long after adulthood. Dramatic and constructivist play take the form of “private fantasy and hypothetical thinking, and accompany the daily internal lives of adults in many of the same ways that overt dramatic play enriches the lives of young children” (p.29).

The third stage of play is the games with rules stage which involves adherence to an external set of rules that govern play. A majority of the use of this type of play marks the transition from pre-operational to concrete operational thought in Piaget’s theory (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). “During this type of play, rules are discussed and agreed upon by all of the players before the game begins” (p.29).

As an educator, it is my responsibility to provide my students with opportunities to interact with other students in a non-academic setting to allow them to grow socially as well as cognitively. Mistrett and Bickart (2009) describe play as being considered to be an integral part of the academic environment because learning is considered to be an active and social process. Creating a play-based learning environment is one that is safe, attractive, comfortable, and efficient. It promotes self-regulation and positive behavior, as well as inviting children to use the materials to engage themselves in the activities offered. A well designed learning environment is split into interest areas. Children are more likely to show positive social behaviors when they are in small spaces as opposed to large and open one.

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Terminology

The following terms were used throughout the study:

Cognitive Development: Focuses on child's development in information processing, perceptual skill, language learning, and brain development (Tracey and Morrow, 2006).

Play: "Play involves a free choice activity that is non-literal, self-motivated, enjoyable, and process oriented. Critical to this definition is the non-literal, non-realistic aspect. This means external aspects of time, use of materials, the environment, rules of the play activity, and roles of the participants are all made up by the children playing. They are based on the child's sense of reality" (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999, p. 27).

Socioconstructivism: Argues that the optimal learning environment is one where a dynamic interaction between instructors, learners and tasks provides an opportunity for learners to create their own truth due to the interaction with others (Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

Oral language is closely related to thinking and understanding. From a social interactionist viewpoint, the individual learns through interactions with others is also important for spoken language which correlates to Vygotsky's theoretical stance. According to Tracey and Morrow (2006), the "Socio-Cultural Theory focuses on the roles of social, cultural, and historical factors in the human experience" (p. 104). Brofenbrenner and Ceci (1994) pose the idea that there are three levels of influence that affect student learning development. These *spheres*, as he calls them, are the microsystem or the student's immediate environment/home/school, the mesosystem or the interaction that takes place between the student's school and home life, and lastly, the exosystem which is the child's parents' work situations. The Socio-Cultural Theory closely aligns itself with the Sociolinguistic Theory which puts a greater emphasis on the

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language interactions. Sociolinguistic theorists think that “oral language is the foundation upon which children’s reading and writing achievement is built” (p. 101). The Sociolinguistic Theory is the idea that language is learned through children’s interactions with each other (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994)

John Dewey was one of the first American constructivists, and a pioneer for American education since the early 1900s. His philosophy had a profound impact on education during the 1920s through the 1950s (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Dewey opened an experimental school that was based on inquiry learning and created the “Activity Curriculum” based upon his beliefs. “...the curriculum was designed to provide students with interesting experiences that were likely to promote curiosity” (p.49). In many present day high-quality education programs, the foundation is built upon Dewey’s beliefs. He emphasized the role of the environment in education, problem-based learning and social collaboration. “Dewey’s original conceptualization of Constructivism has probably influenced reading practices in the classroom most by laying the foundation for understanding of learning as a constructivist experience” (p.66).

Jean Piaget believed that a child’s ability to learn depended on their current stage of development, and as a result of this thinking, teachers established their curriculum to fit the child’s current cognitive ability (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Vygotsky on the other hand concluded that the relationship between learning and development was more complex (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Play provides an important context for learning and development. According to Siraj-Blatchford, Vygotsky (1933) stated that “Only theories maintaining that a child does not have to satisfy the basic requirements of life, but can live in search of pleasure, could possibly suggest that a child’s world is a play world. But the child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be termed a leading activity that determines the child’s

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development” (p. 83). In socio-dramatic play, children become reciprocal and collaborate with their peers, meaning that they communicate, share and create ideas mutually. It is at this point where children develop an understanding of the ‘other’ and of ‘self’ and learning dispositions become more significant. These understandings are often referred to as a theory of mind, and they also facilitate the development of a wider metacognition (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Lev Semionovich Vygotsky’s (1933) approach to child development includes two terms of development: 1) physical-- the normal processes of growth and maturation; and 2) cultural-- the mastery of cultural tools, with speech and language as a fundamental tool of mediation in learning situations (Van der Veer, 2009). Language as a cultural tool is a central theme in Vygotsky’s sociocultural history as it provides the primary means with which two persons engage in dialogue and the construction of knowledge. The most prominent piece of Vygotsky’s work is “the belief that children learn as a result of social interactions with others” (p.108). Vygotsky debated that mastery of language affected children’s learning most. He further argued that “children learn the most about language and corresponding sign systems from the people around them with whom they interact” (p.109). His theory suggests that a child must experience the use of higher mental functioning in social situations before the child can internalize the function. Also, children must learn about cultural communication systems in social situations before they can use these systems. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) states that according to Vygotsky, “a child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired” (p.80). Based on the Socio-Culturist and Constructivists’ viewpoints, play helps young children acquire oral language skills (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Among many changes that we see taking place in preschool children is the rapid growth of language and the development of sentences, vocabulary, conversation skills, and storytelling.

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The Reading First Initiative, part of the No Child Left Behind Act, “focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms. Through Reading First, states and districts receive support to apply scientifically based reading research—and the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with this research—to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, ¶ 9). However, the effects of No Child Left Behind has inadvertently resulted in a “no recess” and a “no play” policy in the elementary curriculum. This is possibly a result of an attitude that “recess is a waste of time that would be better spent on academics” (Johnson, 1998 cited in Henley et al p. 57). Yet, play can provide a perfect setting for watching and monitoring developments in children’s language.

Therefore, my interest in language development and play not only resulted in the literature review located in Chapter 3, but also in the professional development project that is located in Chapter 4. The following questions guided both the literature review and the professional development project:

1. What is the relationship between play and oral language development?
2. What is an effective play-rich environment that promotes oral language?
3. How can a play-enriched environment be implemented?

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Chapter Two

Literature Review

There is extensive research on the importance of active play and recess and its impact on oral language development. One aspect that has been frequently mentioned is the importance of structured versus unstructured play and how to monitor the progress of children's oral language development. Another area of research is the implementation of play into the school curriculum. Play can provide students with the opportunity to grow socially as well as increase their vocabulary, language skills, and storytelling. A third area of research includes the assessment of oral language skills through play. The findings of these studies can be implemented in all elementary grade levels, but would be particularly helpful for those in pre-kindergarten through second grade where early oral language is developed.

What is the relationship between play, recess and oral language development?

In this section, the relationship between play, recess and oral language are examined. When children are engaged in high levels of play, they are not only considered to be playing at a high level, but they are also using higher order thinking skills. The appearance of play is considered one of the most significant cognitive developments of a young child. Because oral language is a "primary component of emergent literacy, it is important to establish the relationship of symbolic play and oral language development" (Stone & Stone, 1996, p.2).

Adeney (2008) studied her two young daughters' discussions while drawing. She collected their scribbles and artwork and documented the type of language that the two girls engaged in as they drew. Next, Adeney developed categories of speech. The study suggests that there is a connection between art-making, play and talk. After mentioning that literacy begins at

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home, she referred to Clay's (2008) work that she uses to guide her own research, and discovered that literacy began "long before children enter formal schooling and that many children already know 52 letter signs and have begun to recognize 11 signs for punctuation" (p. 10). Adeney also noticed that other learning activities were influencing her daughter's literacy growth. Most notably were shared book readings, weekly library visits and attending puppet shows. The categories were chosen based off of the fact that that the majority of the drawings were related to imagination and play. The six categories she divided her study into were storytelling, imaginative play, singing and word play, description and labeling, focusing on letters and self-coaching.

While Adeney studied her own children and the relationship between play and language throughout their entire childhood, Bergen and Fromberg (2009), examine the importance of play in the development of children especially during their middle childhood years which they say are between the ages of eight to twelve. Play helps support children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. The article states that middle childhood play includes practice play, pretense, and games with rules. These activities include repeating the same activity, using symbolic measures to represent characters, and revising or creating new games. The article goes onto discuss the importance of play during the middle childhood years because it is the time when social and emotional competence, imagination, and cognitive development grow with the help of several different types of play. The article also reviews the evolution of play for children and the increased use of technology which may prove as a hindrance in building social competence with other children. Lastly the article examines adult facilitation of play, how to assess play competence and supporting gender equity in play.

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Hill (2010) describes oral language from several theorist viewpoints such as the linguistic, social interactionist, and cognitive development. Each view emphasizes different parts of oral language. This article also provides an example of an oral language program. Included in this article is the discussion of play-based oral language with is a “developmentally appropriate, intrinsic approach that allows children to experiment with oral language and receive instant feedback” (p.5). Hill also provides questions to extend language and for oral language models. Some of the questions that are supposed to help promote children’s oral language are descriptive questions, analytical questions, retelling questions, and questions that include problem solving and inferencing. In Hill’s oral language model is based around play boxes which are fifteen themed boxes with sets of leveled questions to help stimulate children’s oral language. The boxes also include fiction and nonfiction books.

Hill also collaborated with Launder in 2010 creating a collaborative teacher-research study which was conducted during student’s first year of school. This study explored the ways children used oral language, vocabulary, and phonics. The basis of this research was a play-based oral language plan. The results of the study showed that spoken language did not provide a “neat, sequential base which can be easily mapped to written language” (p. 240). This study left Hill and Launder with questions regarding the view of oral language and reading development. The study concluded that learning to read was directly influenced by children’s oral language development and their own literacy experiences.

Pellegrini and Bjorkland (1997) argue that “young children are not able to focus their attention for extended periods of time as well as older children, their cognitive performance will be hindered if they persist at tasks requiring focused attention for prolonged periods” (p. 36). An argument that Pellegrini and Bjorkland make for a prolonged recess in the primary schools is one

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based off of empirical research and anecdotal evidence from Asian schools. What the results found were that recess periods in schools should be expanded and increased. According to the results of this study, indicate that “recess facilitates children’s attention to classroom tasks and possibly cognitive performance” (p.36).

According to Schachter (2005), higher standards are squeezing out playtime throughout the country and that educators are fighting to restore recess to the school day. Principal Ann Jablonski is fighting to keep playtime at Pyrtle Elementary School in Lincoln, Nebraska stating that “kids actually need a break. Adults get breaks at their jobs, and our day is so packed with curriculum. ...The kids are missing part of their childhood” (p. 39).

Watkinson, Dwyer, and Nielsen (2005) elaborate the importance of recess in relation to student’s health, physical, social, and cognitive development of children. This article is from a play theorist point of view. This study was done with ten third grade students with different patterns of engagement in recess. The study questioned if recess was an achievement setting, and if expectancies and values guide activity choices. The results of the study showed that recess could indeed be an achievement setting for those who actively participate. It also indicated that children in third grade valued recess because it provides them with chances to show competence, affiliate with other students and to acquire confidence.

What is an effective play-rich environment that promotes oral language?

An effective play-rich environment can come in many forms. It can be implemented in recess, the classroom curriculum, and in the library. Play-rich environments help to promote oral language development and enhance phonological awareness in young children. According to Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward (1999), a play-rich environment can be described as:

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- pleasurable- where play is an enjoyable and pleasurable activity. Play sometimes includes frustrations, challenges and fears; however enjoyment is a key feature
- symbolic- where play is often pretend, it has a 'what if?' quality. The play has meaning to the player that is often not evident to the educator
- active-play requires action, either physical, verbal or mental engagement with materials, people, ideas or the environment
- voluntary- where play is freely chosen. However, players can also be invited or prompted to play
- process oriented- where play is a means unto itself and players may not have an end or goal in sight
- self motivating- where play is considered its own reward to the player.

Yopp and Yopp (2009) provide an overview of the components included in phonological awareness such as syllables, onset-rimes, and phonemes. It also offers ways that preschool teachers can support phonological awareness development by reading aloud books that provide examples of play with sounds, sharing poetry that plays with sounds, and playing games that draw attention to sounds. Dramatic play is a very valuable asset teachers should use when they are creating a play-rich environment. Play is enjoyable for all but often underestimated for its unique way of positively influencing physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Children especially can become consumed in their own imaginary world of play. This world of play offers children vast opportunities to learn about themselves, others, and the environment in which they live. “Phonological awareness is the sensitivity to the sound structure of language” (p. 12) and demands the ability to turn one’s attention to sounds in spoken language while momentarily shifting away from its real meaning. Teachers can connect phonological awareness

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and play by creating games that play with sounds. In doing so, they should consider the following:

- select games that stimulate language play among participants,
- ensure that games are enjoyable and stress-free for participants,
- encourage, but do not require, children to participate (some will contribute, others will listen),
- participate in the game and model an interest in and excitement about language, and
- respond positively and enthusiastically to children’s attempts to manipulate the sounds of their language (Yopp & Yopp, 2009).

Figure 2.1 shows examples of games for phonological awareness that can help promote and create a play-rich environment.

Figure 2.1 Games for Phonological Awareness (Yopp & Yopp, 2009, p.18)

| Games for Phonological Awareness | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Clapping Syllables | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain to children that the game is to clap the beats (or chunks) of the words they speak. • Begin with clapping the syllables in children’s names. For instance, clap three times as you slowly chant “Erica.” Clap two times as you say “Kareem.” Clap one time as you say “Dan.” • Clap every child’s name during a group activity. It is important to slow down and emphasize each syllable. • Clap all the syllables in other words. Try <i>table, chair, carpet, bookcase, lunch, paper, playground, basketball</i>. Clap on a variety for occasions. For instance, clap the names of foods you are eating for lunch. Let children offer words to clap. • Say a sentence slowly, and then invite children to repeat the sentence with you while you all clap the syllables (“The children went outdoors” will have six claps). |
| Guess Which Object | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold up two objects. (Photographs or picture cards will also work.) Be sure that the objects will bring with different sounds, such as a leaf and a marker. Identify each object |

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with the children to ensure that you all are using the same label.

- Tell the children that the object of the game is for them to guess which of the objects you are thinking of. Let them know that you will give them a clue.
- Tell children the first sound of the word you are thinking of (/l/ if you are thinking of leaf). Or tell children all the individual sounds of the word (“I’m going to say what I’m thinking of in a funny way. I’m thinking of the /l/-/ea/-/f”). Or remove the initial sound of the word (“I’m going to leave off part of the word. Do you know what I’m thinking of? It’s the eaf”).
- Repeat with other objects.
- Offer children the opportunity to be the person who is thinking of the object and provides the clue.

Patt (2009) offers a principal’s suggestions for reconstructing recess and play time to promote oral and cognitive development. A Pennsylvania principal suggests that teachers and administrators schedule play time every day for elementary school children because providing breaks from academics are important, and children need opportunities to practice positive social interactions. Also suggested in the article is providing several materials for children to utilize play with, and by creating a repertoire of engaging activities that are modeled and practiced.

Brouillette’s (2011) discusses the importance of oral language in literacy learning. Children receive clues to meaning through spoken language. This article mainly discusses the importance of talking in the classroom and provides activities to promote children interaction and talking. Brouillette offers an insight into play and oral language in preschools. She states that “language used in play is far more complex than used in regular conversation (p.89). To encourage growth in language, Brouillette suggests that teachers provide children with not only the props but with the opportunity for children to converse, play, and learn.

A play-rich environment can be created right in the library. According to Danforth (2011), by looking for opportunities to create games. She describes play as experimental and

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exploratory, and is “a birthright of all mammals” (p.58). By utilizing all the resources that a library has to offer, you allow students to explore and use their imagination to play and learn.

How can a play-enriched environment be implemented?

Hanvey (2010) examines what she calls a “perplexing problem” which is the decision to remove playtime from schools. She contends that recess activities lead to an increase in academic performance. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) describes play as “an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition, and social competence” (p. 30). Hanvey examines student to student interaction and asserts that play provides children with the chance to interact with print, language, and writing. As a part of her research, Hanvey implemented play boxes into a kindergarten classroom recess. The outcomes of her study showed that the outdoor prop box allowed children to practice their academic skills they were learning inside and boosted their social skills. Some suggestions for creating dramatic play boxes for the classroom are as follows:

- build around thematic units
- collect inexpensive play materials
- designate a specific play area in the classroom
- encourage children to be creative with play themes
- add literacy/print experiences to every play box
- add items to promote character development and prosocial behaviors

Leong and Bondrova (2003) reviewed ways to foster and support higher-level play. They suggest ways to create a play-rich home. Similar to Brouillette, Leong and Bondrova also state the importance of providing children with the proper props to promote mature play. Higher-level

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play requires planning, because when children plan their own scenarios they practice using language. They also discuss the importance of having an uninterrupted block of time for children to play. An idea they share is expanding the play repertoire. To do so they say you can “use photos, use a variety of books, showing videos, encouraging children to act out roles, or using dolls or stuffed animals. Lastly they discuss the importance of giving meaning to words” (p.30-33).

Neuman (2003) examines stories to ignite children’s play, and how plots and characters can inspire kids. She offers suggestions to integrate children’s stories into their play. She states that “Quality pretend play involves lots of language and story-telling, so it is common for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old to use the ideas and language they’ve heard in a favorite movie, TV program, or story “as a point of departure for their own make-believe play. Some suggestions she gives to create a play-rich environment are introducing students to new stories and characters to help develop narrative skills, or use a wordless picture book because it provides the student the opportunity to create and tell the story themselves” (p. 27). Neuman (2006) examines what she calls “the click factor.” This is the fact that literacy begins in a surprisingly simple ways like pretend play, games, and even drawing. “When children “play” with letters, they are assembling information and slowly building their capacity to read the words that are formed” (p. 44).

According to Pullen and Justice (2003), the preschool years are very important to the development of literacy skills. They discuss phonological awareness and letter sounds are among the best indicators of future reading achievement. Oral language is highly related with emergent literacy knowledge. They also talk about the importance of parents and teachers in fostering early literacy skills. This article provides oral language activities, print awareness activities, and

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phonological awareness activities. Some of the activities include focused stimulation, interactive reading, adult-child shared storybook reading, print-enriched play, rhyming and alliteration, blending and segmenting. All of these play-based activities are designed to enrich student's oral language development. They can be implemented into nearly all areas of instruction and can be easily monitored.

Almon (2009) offers several ways to implement and restore play-rich environments and restore play to the classroom. Some suggestions to help restore play are by providing opportunities for students to use their imaginations in the form of storytelling, puppetry, the arts, physical movement, and real work such as cleaning or cooking. Almon (2009) describes the relationship "between hands-on work and imaginative play is one of the unexplored treasures of early childhood" (p. 13).

Constantine's (2003) describes the experimental integration of two selected intervention strategies for children with phonological disorders in a preschool setting. He discusses integrating thematic-fantasy play into phonological instruction. Stories that were used in this thematic-fantasy play curriculum were chosen because they lend themselves to rhyming activities and child role-play. To properly implement thematic play, teachers should model character role-play for children. During story reenactments, children can produce rhyming word pairs in the context of thematic-fantasy play.

To create and implement a play-rich environment into a classroom, Rushton and Larkin (2010) examine the relationship between play, early childhood, and neuroscience. Throughout the article the authors discuss the importance of play in preschool classrooms. They suggest that children should be in a learning environment that supports optimal brain stimulation. What the

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authors feel is an “age appropriate, sensory stimulated, and a “brain-enriched” classroom is one where children are experimenting with sand, two students are engaged in a writing conference, and has offers opportunities for children to observe and become immersed in learning” (p.353). Children should be interacting, conversing and sharing what they are experiencing. The authors state “On average, school age children spend more time in the classroom environment that they do at home. Why not provide learning environments that stimulate the children’s curiosity and allow them to experiment with their surroundings in a manner that is empowering for them?” (p.252).

Students should be provided with numerous opportunities to express and engage in what they are learning, the connections between what has been taught and the application of this learning is then evident not only in the classroom but is also extended into the student’s other discourses. “Emotions plus attention equals learning” (p.354) is the equation that the authors use to describe the learning process. An active learning environment requires numerous components that work both independently of each other and also as a whole set. According to the authors, a sample active learning environment would include:

- “The physical arrangement of the tables, chairs, centers, library, lighting and other components that will attract student’s interests;
- Space should be designed for individual work, small groups, as well as large group meetings;
- The availability of manipulative materials and exploratory spaces that intrigue the natural curiosity of the child; large blocks of time for the child to explore, role play, and experiment; and

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- A compassionate and caring educator who demonstrates a love for learning and models positive interactions” (p.354).

To connect this theory to practice, Rushton and Larkin (2010) contend that children should have a classroom that is filled with age-appropriate literature, materials to manipulate, and questions to excite the children’s interests. By having these components, greater learning opportunities can take place

Hill (2004) explores the features of privileged literacy development in preschool, and also raised questions about universal, normative views of literacy development for all children. The author studied the privileged literacy development where the dispositions, aspirations and expectations at home and at school. Hill defines “privilege as having to do with rank or advantage of a particular group, and can be based on one or more of social, economic, psychological and national factors” (p.159). Hill examines curriculums that are based on student interests and the teachers at the Winston Early Childhood Centre described their approach to planning the curriculum as “Flying with the children’s interests and ideas.” They also commented that “We observe, listen, and find a theme; we find something that they are interested in and we make their dreams come true” (p.161-162).

Hill (2010) also provides examples of a play-rich curriculum and reveals how the social and cultural investment of children was used to create the literacy curriculum. The first example in the article was having a castle that the students created and designed. The play that took place within the castle was about who was going to play king and queen, and one student suggested there being two kings. The oral language strategy was used to convince the teacher that their needed to be two kings. This play can continue for weeks and can also carry over to outside play

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(Hill, 2010). Another example of creating a play enhanced classroom was having a breakfast concert. “The students created a list of what was needed, and the students performed songs of a pop-group. The children used the stage to practice songs and dance moves” (p. 163-164). These are both great examples of ways to integrate play into the classroom.

Mistrett and Bickart (2009) suggest that having a high quality early childhood program and one that promotes a child’s natural instinct to play and where the learning environment is designed to provide opportunities for children to figure things out, practice skills, and understand new concepts. The learning environment includes the physical space as well as the daily routines and schedule that provides structure and a sense of order. The first piece to creating an effective play-rich environment is to create a safe, attractive, comfortable and efficient physical environment. Next, by having a well-defined space that is divided into distinct interest areas where only a few children can go at a time. Limiting the amount of distractions so that children can concentrate on their work better is another important aspect to consider when creating the learning environment. Interest areas must be well-organized and uncluttered, and materials should be displayed so that children can see and use them easily. In a high-quality childhood curriculum, teachers set up the environment so that interest areas both indoors and outdoors can be used effectively (Mistrett & Bickart, 2009).

Mistrett and Bickart (2009) also believe that academic learning starts with active play, and that play-based learning works. The authors state that teachers “set the stage for children’s learning by selecting materials they know will engage children and by organizing materials effectively in interest areas” (p. 21). Teachers also provide guidance when children need help and ask questions to spark student interest. According to the authors, “When children are free to

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follow their interests within an environment that supports and extends their exploration, they learn” (p.21).

These books, articles, and research findings were all used to answer the three main questions: What is the relationship between play and oral language development, what is an effective play-rich environment that promotes oral language, and how can a play-enriched environment be implemented? Based on these findings a professional development has been planned and implemented where teachers will participate and learn more about the relationship between play and oral language, and how to create and implement a play-rich environment.

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Chapter Three

Methods

Overview of Methodology

Materials for this Master's Project were collected from the electronic data bases ERIC, One File, and Education Research Complete. Search engines researched for policies and professional organizations were www.nationalreadingpanel.org, www.nysed.gov, and www.naeyc.org. Research-based articles, books, and research studies have been examined to answer my questions about the impact of play on children's oral language development.

Data Collection

This Masters Project was designed as a professional development project. I used research databases, government websites and curriculum to find concrete answers to my research questions. ERIC, Education Research Complete, OneFile, government websites, and have been used thus far. To locate research-based articles the following search terms were used: "active play", "oral language development", "language and play", "play and oral language", "play-enriched classrooms", and "active play and oral language development." Articles that were used to create the professional development included articles with the keywords, "professional development", "educating teachers", and "creating a professional development".

The information in the articles, books, and studies was selected based on several criteria: key terms that were searched were oral language, play, active play, recess, and oral language development and were found through educational resources such as ERIC, Education Research Complete, and by sifting through high-quality educational texts.

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Data Analysis

Based on the criteria, articles were selected and analyzed and then divided into three groups. The first group consisted of articles that focused on the relationship between play and oral language. The second group consisted of articles that examined how to create a play-rich environment that promotes oral language. The third group consisted of articles which addressed how a play-rich environment can be implemented. From there, subcategories to the research questions were developed and the articles were used to focus the topic.

A professional development experience will be implemented to demonstrate how teachers can effectively incorporate play into their classrooms to promote oral language development. When I mention “professional development,” I am not referring to a singular event, but an ongoing, inquiry-based learning experience. This professional development will be conducted for primary and elementary school teachers. This will be advantageous for all teachers because it will discuss the importance of play in young children’s cognitive development, and will provide them with ways in which they can implement active play into their curriculum as well as ways to assess students while they are playing and interacting with their peers.

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Chapter Four**Professional Development Project**

The professional development began with one workshop, but included more in an ongoing process that continued throughout the length of one full school year. To prepare for this professional development workshop and to answer my research questions that I generated, I referred to several sources. I utilized the research databases ERIC, One File, and Education Research Complete to compile a literature review. I examined articles in high quality educational texts such as *The Reading Teacher*. I located articles on adult learning for the teachers so I was able to conduct this professional development the best way that I can. After locating my articles I grouped them into categories that correlate with my research questions, or into groups with similar topics. All of the articles were studied carefully and read with a critical eye to assure their reliability.

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Figure 4.1 Professional Development Cycle (Vermont, 2011, p. 3)

**Intended Audience**

This professional development was designed for elementary school teachers targeting those who taught preschool through second grade. While all elementary teachers would benefit from this professional development, those teaching the targeted grade would profit from it most because those are the grades where early oral language development occurs and is most important. This professional development is highly hands-on because “an activity is more likely

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to be effective in improving teachers' knowledge and skills if it forms a coherent part of a wider set of opportunities for teacher learning and development" (Birman et al, 2000, p.29).

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of this professional development are to provide the teachers and administration with a play-based curriculum that promotes and builds upon oral language development, which could ultimately be implemented into their daily school curriculum. Each bi-monthly session includes hands-on examples, demonstrations and strategies for creating a play-based curriculum. By completion of the school calendar, teachers will have a much better understanding of how to incorporate active play into their curriculum. They will be provided with the knowledge base and materials to use in their own classroom with their students. The teachers will be taught the relationship between active play and how it can help enrich children's oral language skills. Through this professional development program, teachers will have several opportunities to observe colleagues teaching lessons that are play-based and are designed to help promote students' oral language development.

Birman et al (2000) examines six factors that provide great potential for achieving effective professional development results: form, duration, content focus, collaborative participation, active learning, and coherence. The following table (4.1) displays the characteristics for each structural feature that set the context for the professional development program; *Enriching Student's Oral Language Development Through Active Play* as well as the researchers who support these findings. Following the table is an explanation of each component and how it will be implemented into the professional development program.

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Table 4.2 Components of the Professional Development

| Component | Description | Research Support |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Form | Reform activities are thought to be more responsive to how teachers learn and have more influence on changing teaching practice. | Birman et al. (2000) |
| Duration | Activities that are of longer duration have more subject-area focus, more opportunities for active learning, and more coherence with teachers' other experiences than do shorter activities. Teachers can share progress, difficulties, ideas, issues, and needs. | Birman et al. (2000); Bull & Buechler (1995); Klentschy (2005) |
| Content Focus | Focusing on content means targeting a staff development activity on a specific subject area or on a subject-specific teaching method. | Birman et al. (2000); |
| Collective Participation | The participation of teachers from the same department, subject or grade are more likely to afford opportunities for active learning and are more likely to be coherent with teachers' other experiences. | Birman et al. (2000); Bull & Buechler (1995); Klentschy (2005) |
| Active Learning | By providing teachers with a professional development that includes opportunities for active learning have an increased knowledge and changed classroom practice. | Birman et al. (2000) |
| Coherence | The coherence of professional development with policies and other professional experiences is directly related to increased teacher learning and improved classroom practice. | Birman et al. (2000) |

Form

Birman et al. (2000) explained in their components of their professional development that workshops should include reform types of activities which are more effective “primarily because they are longer and thus have more content focus, active learning opportunities and coherence” (p.29). When traditional forms of activities, such as workshops, are longer, they have better core features and are just as effective. Table 4.2 is a framework of how the professional development program take place for the duration of one school year. It outlines the session dates, the

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participants, and how they are grouped as well as the content that will be discussed during each session.

Table 4.3 Form of Professional Development

| Session Date and Duration | Grouping | Content |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| 9/2/2012 2 Hours | Whole Group | Introduction: The format for future sessions and an overview of the findings from the literature review will be discussed. |
| 9/16/2012 2 Hours | Grade Level Groups | Activities: Teachers from each grade level will chose play-based activities that will help promote oral language development. |
| 9/30/2012 2.5 hours | Whole Group | Activities and Assessments: Grade level groups will model the activities they created the previous session. Effective ways to assess student progress will be introduced. |
| 10/14/2012- 11/3/2012 | Individual/Grade Level Groups | Implementation and Discussions: Teachers will implement the lessons and activities the grade level group created. Colleagues will observe each other and provide feedback and constructive criticism. |
| 11/17/2012 | Whole Group | Reflection: Teachers will present their findings to the whole group and administration, and will discuss any breakthroughs or challenges they encountered. The whole group will discuss ways to adjust grade level activities to fit into a different grade. |
| 12/1/2012- 6/1/2013 | Whole Group, Grade Level Groups | Repeat sessions 2, 3, 4 throughout the remainder of the school year. |

As a result of the benefits of having the professional development program being structured as a “reform” activity (study group, teacher network, mentoring relationship, committee, task force, internship, individual research project, or teacher resource center), the

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program *Enriching Student's Oral Language Through Active Play* will take on many forms.

And will include innovative teacher immersion, network activities, and hands-on experience while having an appropriate duration, subject-matter content, active learning and coherence.

Duration

The professional development will allow for continuous learning opportunities that will become a part of teachers' everyday working lives and part of the schools' institutional priorities. Activities that have a "longer duration have more subject-area content focus, more opportunities for active learning, and more coherence with teachers' other experiences than do shorter activities" (Birman et al. 2000, p. 30). The professional development workshop will be an ongoing workshop over the duration of one full school year. By having this be an ongoing workshop, teachers' will be able to learn and adjust their learning and teaching styles and apply them to their own classrooms.

Content Focused

Birman et al. (2000) found that professional development workshops that were focused on only one specific content-area to be the most effective. If teachers are expected to "teach to new standards, including complex thinking skills, it is essential that they have a sophisticated understanding of the content and of how students learn that content" (p. 30). They also explained that the workshop activities must be aligned with the state and national standards.

The topic of this professional development workshop will focus on play and how when integrated into the curriculum can promote and enhance student oral language development. Each session throughout the school year will have a specific component that will be discussed. These topics include but are not limited to introductions, play boxes, activities, assessments,

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implementations, discussions, and reflections. Throughout the course of this professional development workshop, teachers will have the opportunity to learn new strategies and will be allowed to integrate them into their classroom. Because the sessions repeat themselves, participants will have the chance to show growth and develop play-based activities that focus on promoting oral language development.

Collective Participation

Collective participation has several advantages. Birman et al. (2000) found that collective participation allows teachers to discuss concepts and problems that may result during the staff development. Also, collective participation “gives teachers the opportunity to integrate what they learn with other aspects of their instructional content, because teachers from the same school, department or grade are likely to share common curriculum materials, course offerings, and assessment requirements” (p.30). Also, collective participation may also contribute to a shared professional culture where teachers in the same school, grade, or subject may develop a common understanding of instructional goals, methods, problems and solutions.

All of the participating teachers will work together on creating instructional tools and a curriculum where play is the central topic and will develop and refine play activities where play can enrich oral language. The groupings will vary between individualized, grade level groups, and whole group sessions. Dividing the groups based on grade levels, the teachers are able to collaborate and create and design lessons that are play-based, but are also age and grade appropriate for the stages of children’s oral language development.

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Active Learning

Birman et al (2000) found in their study that teachers whose professional development includes opportunities for active learning, report an increased knowledge and their skills changed classroom practice. Active learning encourages teachers to become engaged in meaningful discussion, planning, and practice as part of professional development activities. “Active learning includes opportunities to observe and be observed teaching: to plan classroom implementation, such as practicing in simulated conditions and developing lesson plans; to review student work; and to present lead and write...” (p. 31).

Throughout the course of the professional development, teachers will take turns teaching and observing play activities which enhance students’ oral language development. Teachers will be divided into grade level groups and will utilize articles and materials given to generate play-based activities and lessons. Examples will be given at the beginning of each session. For example, play boxes will be introduced to the faculty and examples of how to create grade level play boxes will be given. Also, teachers will be given several articles that support play-based learning. Upon completion of each session, teachers will have a chance to complete a self-reflection as well as a reflection of the entire experience thus far.

Coherence

Coherence indicated the extent to which professional development experiences are part of an integrated program of teacher learning. Activities are to be consistent with teacher goals, aligned with state and federal standards, build upon previous activities, and involve teachers in discussing their experiences with other teachers and administrators in the school.

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Upon completion of the workshop, the teachers will understand which state and national standards are addressed, and what goals for student learning each session embodied. Teachers will have the chance to observe other teachers and be critiqued as well. The idea of coherence is designed to make sure that activities are consistent with goals and standards. Also, observing and critiquing other teachers allows for teacher growth.

Outline of the Professional Development Program

Session 1: Two Hours: Whole Group

The main goal of the first session is to set the purpose for the professional development workshop. The session will be two hours and all elementary teachers are encouraged to attend. The session will take place in the school gym where tables and chairs will be set up. There will be displays at each center where teachers will move from center to center completing an activity that is play-based. All the materials, handouts, and refreshments will be provided. There will be a ten-minute break after one hour.

Session 2: Two Hours: Grade Level Groups

Session 2 will begin with a brief overview of what play-based learning is and how it can be used to enhance students' oral language development. The faculty will be divided based on their grade levels. During this session, teachers will create a play-based activity based on articles supporting play-based learning. All materials will be provided at this session. The teachers are to work together to create an activity that is engaging, educational, and also promotes oral language development. An example of a play box will be shown at the beginning of the session. A play box has several materials such as a cape, books, blocks, etc. where students can explore the box and use their imagination to create their own play experience.

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Session 3: Two Hours: Whole Group

During the third session, the faculty will come together as a whole group and discuss their activities and lessons they created in the previous session. Each grade level will model their lessons to their colleagues. At this time, teachers and administrators will have a chance to provide feedback and take ideas from the lessons that were taught and adapt them to make them age appropriate for their grades. Also at this session, effective assessment forms will also be introduced and discussed.

Session 4: Ongoing: Individual and Grade Level Groups

During these sessions, teachers will be implementing the lessons they have created during the first three sessions into their classrooms. They will have the opportunity to observe and critique their colleagues on their lessons. By observing each other, they are able to see what works and what doesn't and provides them with the chance to offer constructive criticism. During these sessions, professional development evaluations will be conducted. Staff development evaluations serves two broad purposes: to better understand the professional development so that it can be adjusted and strengthened, and to determine what effects professional development has had in terms of its intended outcomes. The first purpose is of interest to the professional development leaders so they can see why something does or does not work and how it can be improved. The second purpose answers questions often asked by policymakers and educational leaders: Did this professional development improve student learning? Has the money and time invested in particular staff development efforts make a difference for teachers and for students?

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Session 5: Two Hours: Whole Group

After a month of implementations and observations, the faculty will come together as a whole group to discuss their progress and opinions of the professional development thus far. It allows for teachers to reflect on their teachings, their play-based learning strategies, as well as any struggles or challenges they may have encountered throughout the program. During this session, teachers will also discuss ways to adapt lessons to make them grade and age appropriate. The weeks following the completion of session five, the participants will repeat sessions two-five focusing on new skills and play-based learning strategies they have developed.

Figure 4.4 shows the change in professional development workshops so that it includes all six major contents, and can achieve the most effective results.

Figure 4.4 Making the Most Out of Professional Development (Vermont, 2011, p. 4)

| From | To |
|--|---|
| Professional development as an event | Professional development as a learning process |
| Focus on planning, attending and evaluating a professional development event | Focus on planning, implementing and evaluating learning and change in educator practice |
| Adult need centered | Student need centered |
| Professional development through in-service day presentations | School's plan a continuum of learning throughout the year focused on student learning goals |
| Focus on individual development | Focus on collaborative learning with a focus on team, school and system improvement |
| Presenter transmits knowledge, skills and strategies | Facilitator leads inquiry into teaching and learning |
| Pull out training workshop or course | Job-embedded learning featuring teacher collaboration and use of coaches |
| Fragmented, piece-meal, one-shot | Driven by clear, coherent, long-term strategic plan |
| The latest popular program | Research based and standards based |

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A helpful tool used in implementing school change and new practices is The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) which was developed by Shirley Hord at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Vermont, 2011). The CBAM model is client-centered, can identify the special needs of individual users and allows for change. By taking this approach to professional development, it helps to maximize the “prospects for successful school improvement projects while minimizing the innovation-related frustrations of individuals” (p.12).

By implementing the following four steps school leaders and the professional development team can make the professional development workshop have more of an impact. The first step is to conduct a needs assessment. To have a successful workshop, you must know the needs to be able to plan to meet them. A needs assessment “helps build on existing strengths, determine what kind of help is needed, and helps develop a vision for improvement and reform” (p.17). The second step is to set professional learning goals and plan to evaluate the impact of professional learning. After you have determined the specific areas where students were not achieving and created goals to increase student achievement, the next step is to develop desired outcomes and specific measures of success, limit learning initiatives, and complete determine who needs to participate in the learning.

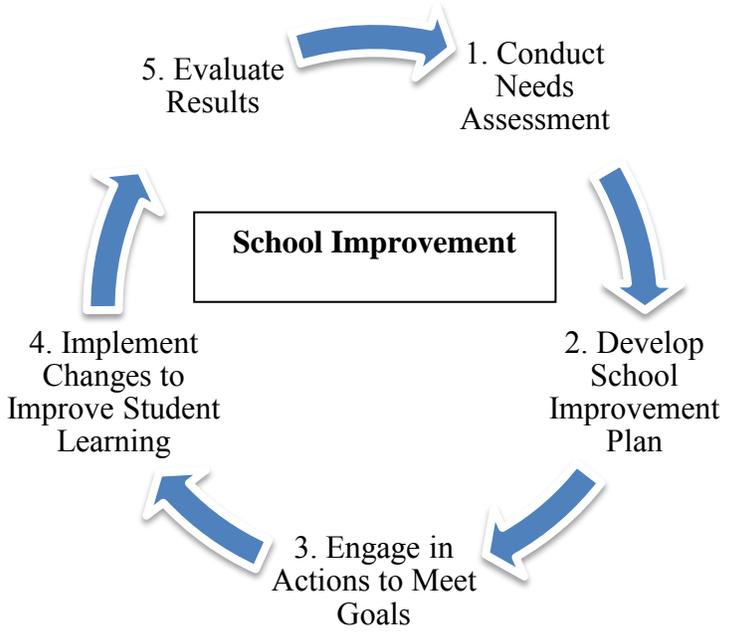
When working with young students who are beginning to develop oral language, all students will need to participate in learning. The next step is to plan how professional learning will occur and to plan on supporting educators when they are implementing their new learning of the importance of play and oral language and developing a theory of change. Lastly, you must evaluate the professional development. Professional development is a great tool to help improve schools and increase student learning. This workshop will take a very hands-on approach and

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will offer several ways to incorporate play into the academic curriculum. Each session will include one or two strategies such as play boxes and creating a play-rich environment.

Below is a chart (figure 4.3) that shows the alignment between the professional development and the continuous school improvement cycle. Each of the 7 steps above is an important element of professional learning.

Figure 4.5 School Improvement



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Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

Overview of Study and Findings

The purpose of this study, and resulting professional development program, focused on socioconstructivist and play theorist pedagogy and it manifests in the importance of play in the learning and development of oral language of young students and how educators utilize active play in the curriculum. This professional development was designed to answer the important research question: Does active play enhance students' oral language? Researchers express that by incorporating play into the school curriculum, students' oral language development is increased. They call for quality, research based activities to be implemented so that students at all instructional levels can benefit from active play.

In order to schedule the professional development, research on adult learning was examined so that teachers would learn and benefit from the workshop. Also, research on professional development workshops came to the conclusion that a continuous and ongoing workshop is most effective for teachers. This professional development workshop will take place over the course of one school year. The workshop is divided into 5 sessions where articles, strategies, assessments, and teacher reflection and observations. The participants will be split into different groups based on grade level. The articles that were discussed in the literature review also helped guide the creation of this professional development workshop. Research showed that by having structured play significantly influenced student learning, especially their oral language development. The goal of this professional development experience was to correlate the research with classrooms and to integrate play into the school curriculum.

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Significance of the Project

Play theorists say that when students are engaged in play activities, their vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and oral language is increased. Dramatic play is the portrayal of life as seen from the actor's view. In early childhood, drama needs no written lines to memorize, structured patterns to imitate, and an audience is not needed either. Children need only a safe and interesting environment and the freedom to experiment with roles, conflict, and problem solving. When students are provided with such an environment, they become interested in and will attend to the task at hand and develop their concentration and oral language skills. Dramatic play allows children to fit the reality of the world into their own interests and knowledge. Piaget (1962) said that one of the purest forms of symbolic thought available to young children. Dramatic play contributes strongly to the intellectual development of children. Symbolic play is a necessary part of a child's language development.

Opportunities for dramatic play that are spontaneous, child-centered, child-initiated, and open-ended are important for all young children. Individual expression is essential in a child's oral language development, so children of all physical and cognitive abilities enjoy and learn from dramatic play and dramatics. Dramatic play expands as a child's awareness of self in relation to others and the environment. Research shows that play has a positive effect on children's development. It is enjoyable for all, but play is often underestimated for its unique way of positively influencing physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Young students can especially become consumed in their own imaginary world of play. This world offers them a large amount of opportunities to learn about themselves, others, and the environment in which they live. Play increases their problem solving skills, creative thinking, playing, organizing and especially their language skills.

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After researching the questions generated for the purpose of this project, it was decided that the use of active play in the school curriculum enhances student's cognitive abilities as well as their oral language development. The professional development experience was designed to supply teachers with activities and opportunities to create a play-rich environment.

Limitations

The professional development project was designed to be implemented in an elementary school setting. The success of the workshop is determined by the teacher reflections, student success, teacher observations and the feedback survey. One distinct limitation of the professional development workshop is that it was not implemented, so the effectiveness of the workshop cannot be measured. The goal of the whole experience was to provide teachers with the tools and strategies to implement play into the school curriculum. Research showed that assessing student growth was difficult, but not impossible. The type of play that students engage in may be another limitation. If it is unstructured play, students may not fully benefit from the activities. These limitations were not taken into consideration when creating the professional development experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

The articles that were studied in the literature review focused on how to create a play-rich environment and how it can impact students' oral language development. Although there is limited research on this topic, it is suggested that further research should be conducted. Continued research on this topic may be more flexible and include all cognitive areas instead of narrowing in on just oral language development, and it would be beneficial to research the impact of play on cognitive, social, and emotional areas of children's development. Also, the time span for studies and articles should be long-term studies.

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Research suggested that all types of play are examined, and all work collectively together. My classroom will have students of all cognitive and processing levels and they will benefit most from a play-based curriculum that has constructive play, dramatic play, and games with rules. I will also have structured play so I can assess student learning and track growth. Play boxes will be created on a bi-weekly basis to ensure a variety of types of play experiences. Play-rich experiences will be creative, interactive, and created so that students can have the best learning experience possible.

The most important piece of knowledge that was gained from this Master's Thesis Project was that active play benefits all students at all ability levels. One of the most interesting aspects of implementing a play curriculum is helping teachers understand its importance. So, research on change in teacher beliefs is needed.

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