

8-2012

The Effect of Play on the Literacy Development of Students with Severe Disabilities

Lindsay Marie Kelly

The College at Brockport, lindsayrtrtr@yahoo.com

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The Effect of Play on the Literacy Development of Students with Severe Disabilities

By

Lindsay Marie Kelly

August 2012

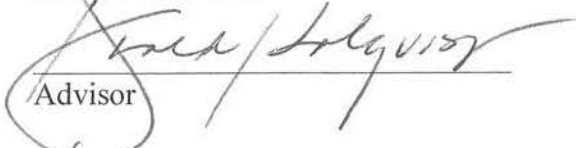
A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of
The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

The Effect of Play on the Literacy Development of Students with Severe Disabilities

by

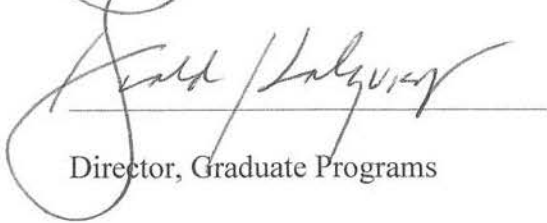
Lindsay Marie Kelly

APPROVED BY:



Advisor

August 1, 2012
Date



Director, Graduate Programs

August 1, 2012
Date

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Walking into my classroom after a meeting put me in a great mood. *Kids Bop sings the Beatles* (Kidz Bop Kids - Razor & Tie Music, 2009) is playing in the background as I make my way over to meet my students in the toy play area. A small area rug with roads and pictures of street signs on it covers the floor. My students are all smiles when I approach them sitting on the carpet.

I notice how they are playing so nicely with each other; I watch the little, purple glasses girl with curly-Q hair handing a large red block to another student as they work towards building a tower together. When I glance around the carpet I see the same little girl is now playing “teacher,” holding a book up as if she were reading aloud to her fellow students. Slurs and different noises come out of her mouth and none of her peers around her pay her attention as she carries out this gracious act, yet it is clear her face displays the joy of being playful and the bliss of her pretending to be something else, if only for a brief while and even if no one is listening.

Observing my seven students in my special education classroom, a 7:1:4 setting (seven students, one teacher, and four teacher aides) makes me think of many questions related to the most efficient ways to create a meaningful learning environment based on their diverse needs. It’s now time for work bins, a half hour of our school day designed to cater directly to the individual needs of each student based on what is written on his/her Individual Education Program (IEP) and to work on other skills the student may need to develop. One female student, Abby (all student names are pseudonyms) is diagnosed with Coffin Siris Syndrome as well as other multiple disabilities.

As Goyal, Yadav, Shukla, and Sethi (2010) note:

Coffin-Siris syndrome is a rare genetic disorder, also known as 'fifth digit syndrome'. In this syndrome, the most frequent findings include: mental retardation, coarse facial features, short stature, hirsutism, hypotonia, short fifth fingers, hypoplastic nails of the fifth fingers and toes, hypoplastic or absent distal phalanx of the fifth finger, and lax joints. (pp.1-3).

A small, disoriented, high pitched yell focuses my attention to the back of Abby's tiny blue chair, which stands maybe a foot off of the floor. Her little jeaned legs dangling off and barely touch the floor. Abby is facing the wall sitting at her desk across the room sectioned away from the other students to steer her away from distractions. The aide sitting next to her tries to redirect her in a positive and encouraging voice, "Abby, it's time to do your work. Let's try your letters!" I watch Abby touch her face, and all of a sudden her purple rectangle glasses fly across the room and land on our classrooms bathroom floor. Abby lets out another scream, this one much louder and higher pitched than the last. It is obvious to me that although she is not yet equipped with the language needed to express her frustration, she is still trying to convey the message that she wants nothing to do with this work task. I know that Abby is fully capable of doing the task; however she will show signs of non-compliance if she does not want to fully engaged with the task at hand.

I turn my attention to what some of my other students are accomplishing (or not) for their work tasks. I notice Rachel who has been diagnosed with Rett's Syndrome, a neurodevelopment disorder that slows down development in intellectual ability as well as in the function of the neurological parts of the body (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2011). She is sitting with her staff member, struggling with even glancing at the story book in front of her that she needs to be looking at in order to fulfill her goals of visually attending to the book

and picking out the main character of the book given a field of two characters. Instead, Rachel concentrates on self stimulating herself by folding and playing with her hands, manipulating her fingers intertwining them constantly, and putting her hands into her mouth. Rachel appears to be completely over stimulated; laughing uncontrollably and grabbing the blue shirt of the staff member, covering it in her saliva. The staff member appears frustrated with Rachel's behavior as I look at the staff members face, blushed in her cheeks and her eyes roll excessively during this task. The staff member assesses Rachel's performance on the goal data sheet with an "N" on the goal sheet for the incompleteness of the task.

Rachel's behaviors indicate that she is in the, "plateau stage" of Rett's syndrome or Stage III/pseudo-stationary stage, which usually begins in females between ages 2 and 10 (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2011). Apraxia, motor problems, and seizures are prominent during this stage (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2011). However, there may be improvement in behavior, with less irritability, crying, and autistic-like features. A girl in stage III may show more interest in her surroundings and her alertness, attention span, and communication skills may improve (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2011). Because I have repeatedly observe Rachel and witnessed her complete this task of visually attending to the story and selecting the main character after actively listening to the story sufficiently with her, I know she is capable of completing this task, however, she is not doing so today. She needs to be more engaged with the work task in order to be successful a majority of the time.

Another student who takes my interest is Sam who is sitting in his wheelchair. Much like Abby, Sam sits facing a corner to limit him from being a distraction to the other students due to his popularity. Sam is a functioning student diagnosed with multiple disabilities and Cerebral

Palsy (CP). He can show signs of being a high functioning student as he responds well to staff engagement and when fully engaged in a task of any kind, can really shine through and prove that he has the cognitive ability to comprehend many things. For example, when Sam is engaged with a group activity and asked what he needs to color his picture, he can navigate through the use of his communication device and request a marker, crayon or whatever has been instructed for him to request. At times if not fully engaged and enjoying the activity, he can become non-compliant. For example, Sam frequently will not be fully engaged in individual work tasks and when asked to match the same color to the visual cue color card that the staff holds up, he will navigate to every other color except the one being requested of him to locate. He will also show additional signs of non-compliance in which Sam will look around at everything else in the room except for his device that he is supposed to be looking at, even when placed in a more confined and less visually stimulating side room area to encourage his focus. Sam will also laugh if he notices that the staff member working with him shows any signs of frustration with his actions, and therefore will tend to escalate his behaviors.

Because Sam cannot verbally communicate he uses a DynoVox communication system with an attached EyeMax system, which allows him to communicate through the use of his pupils directed and calibrated to the device. As Sam directs his eyes onto a specific selection on the computer/device, it speaks for him. At times, Sam becomes disengaged with an activity and purposefully chooses incorrect buttons on his device and will need to be directed by a teacher. My colleagues and I interpret these as times when he is not engaged with the work task of identifying the letters, but instead he is pushing buttons that are inappropriate for this task, while laughing the entire time. Based on his previous behaviors, we recognize that Sam is fully capable of identifying letters but at times he needs to be more engaged with this task in order to

fully succeed and master it. I suspect that he needs to be introduced to activities of identifying his letters that are more playful so that he does not feel the demand placed on him.

I believe that for all three of these diverse students and scenarios and the problem is consistent and similar: in order for the students to be engaged and motivating the tasks that I ask them to do should be designed to be more playful and engaging.

Significance of the Problem

As I observe my students with significant special needs, I realized that they need to be approached and supported to reach their fullest potential through engagement. At this time, I recognize that they are not fully motivated and engaged with the work they are given, and thus not reaching their fullest potential. This is a cause for concern as Gately (2007) states that even despite the laws written and in place for students with disabilities, students with these needs still remain at high risk of experiencing substandard literacy experiences in their schools. Helping my students achieve their literacy goals will not only assist them in their educational future and even in their independent lives, but will also assist me in my teaching experiences, pushing me to excel in my work as a teacher. I agree with Catalano and Madray (2010) who believe that,

“Researchers and educators have continually supported the fact that children learn when they play. Studies have indicated that by providing young children and infants with appropriate and stimulating experiences, their neurological, cognitive, brain, physical and motor skills abilities are enhanced” (p.11).

I have come to realize that it is not always easy to teach students with severe disabilities, especially those students with little or no verbal capabilities. As I have learned throughout my educational career, I have to get to know my students, and teach to their strengths and abilities. This holds true for students with severe impairments; the teacher needs to know their students and teach them to their fullest potential. As Gately (2007) writes, programs for students with severe disabilities are often based on paired associate learning tasks or skill-based phonics programs, with little or no attention paid to comprehension and helping students to construct real understanding of big ideas. This presents a problem for these students because teachers are not always sure if the student with the impairment truly understands the instruction fully.

Cowden (2010) states that language experiences assist students in developing an understanding of reading and writing. Abby, Rachel and Sam have limited language. The practice and repetition of language will assist them learning more concepts about print. Basil and Reyes (2003) state that a significant problem in developing literacy skills for students with significant impairments can be attributed to poor instruction, lack of self motivation and confidence, and failure at school tasks. I plan on addressing and encouraging my students' self confidence and motivation through the use of active praise and reinforcement, which is our standard at this school on a daily basis already.

I believe Abby, Rachel and Sam need to be more engaged with their learning in order to be successful. I also believe that many people believe that students with severe disabilities, such as the students in my 7:1:4 classroom, are unable to learn in general. The reason I think and believe this is when I tell people about the students with whom I work , they usually respond with questions such as, "So it's like babysitting?" or, "What can you even teach those kids anyway?" or, "Oh, that's not a real school right?" All of the negative and pessimistic comments

I have heard over my nine years of working with students with severe disabilities fuels me with the determination, which I take to work every day to help and encourage my students to learn anything they possibly can. My thinking parallels that of Erickson and Koppenhaver (1995) who believe that,

“It is difficult for you to learn to read and write, many of the people closest to you do not view you as a capable learner, and there are no models of best practice in providing you with appropriate literacy instruction. (p. 677)

As I have learned throughout my literacy education courses, literacy involves many elements: speaking, listening, writing, reading and visually representing. These elements are complex and develop over time by any typically developing students who also build understanding through experiences. Such processes are much more difficult for those students with severe disabilities; however, I believe that if my colleagues and I find what engages and motivates our students they, like any student, can succeed. I recognize through my observations of students that they are happiest during their unstructured play, and therefore, if I can employ this type of environment into their demand work activities, that they will be more engaged with their work, which will help them to master their tasks.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study, then, is to engage my students with severe multiple disabilities in their literacy designed individual education program goals through the use of play activities. Whether the task is to identify letters of the alphabet or find the main character of the

story, all students have the right to a comfortable, engaging and meaningful learning environment to best suit their individual needs.

Through this six week research study, I intend to answer the research questions:

- *How can students with severe disabilities use play to achieve their literacy related goals, specifically in relationship to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?*
- *What specific types of play can students with severe disabilities use to achieve their literacy related goals, specifically in relationship to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?*

I have designed this study to observe and reflect on how play infused literacy instruction affects Abby's, Rachel's and Sam's learning processes and their literacy development.

Through this study, I anticipate that I will learn about literacy play instruction, how to integrate it more purposeful into the context of my classroom, and improve my own personal knowledge and skills as a special education teacher. I believe that it is possible for all students to be able to learn, that learning may take place at different times than other students, and the process may be different, but all students are entitled to the opportunity to learn; this is my educational philosophy.

Students with severe disabilities learn best through practice, modeling, repetition and positive reinforcement. They also require additional time to process and retain knowledge and information. While all of these things assist my students in their learning, they also need to be engaged in their learning through engagement and play with the incorporation of their senses,

which is why at our alternative school, sensory based play activities are frequently used to assist students with gaining knowledge and connecting their world through the use of multisensory activities to help engage them.

In my classroom, my students rely on individualized and modified instruction and respond well to activities that invite them to use their multiple senses. Many students with severe disabilities also have tactile defensiveness and therefore incorporating multiple tactiles within lessons helps them to learn through their multiple senses. My philosophy of teaching relates to Gately (2007) who believes that teachers must not allow students' labels to interfere with their expectations that all students can learn.

Through the process of conducting this study, I hope to enhance my skills as a teacher-researcher. I hope to learn what types of play best help my students with severe disabilities learn and support their literacy developments. As a teacher, it is my job to help them through modeling and scaffolding to push them towards their independence, as well as determine what types of play are most engaging for them to learn. I also hope to discover what types of play other teachers in this specialized school use with their students and to assist other colleagues in my school to diverse types of play that can contribute to this populations learning. I expect that through this process there will be times when I become discouraged through much trial and error; however, I plan on persevering through the difficult times by having a topic that I have such passion for and which the outcome could benefit my students. Because my work as a special education teacher changes from year to year, I never know just what type of classroom and students to expect. I feel that through this research, I will learn much about myself as a teacher, researcher and develop new tools through my experiences to carry with me as an educator.

Study Approach

As the teacher-researcher I have designed this study to focus on how the use of play related to literacy based instruction supports my students with severe disabilities. Also, I am determined to develop my skills as a special educator, and enhance my abilities to assist students in reaching their goals. In support of the connections between the literacy and play, Saracho and Spodek (2005) state that children's literacy behaviors surface in a play setting when they attain knowledge on the purposes and features of print in early literacy development. Linder (1990) recognizes that play experience are less threatening and more engaging and enjoyable for students.

Because of the diverse needs of the students who attend our particular school, my fellow teachers and I are able to create our own curriculum, based upon the students' needs within our classrooms. The school's overall goal is to prepare students with the skills needed to adapt to life after leaving the school and into an environment where they will have maximum independence as possible and success in society.

Abby, has a diagnosis of Coffin Siris Syndrome along with multiple disabilities. Abby is currently is 7.11 years old and is a Caucasian female student. Abby conveys significant cognitive delays and she has extremely limited speech abilities as she can only articulate a handful of words, such as, "No!", "Help!", "Doggy" and certain preferred names of people she recognizes. Although she can attempt these few words, many words can be very difficult to decipher to the unfamiliar ear. Abby shows signs that she is extremely tactile defensive and even the mere sight of sticky textures will cause her to vomit. She uses a Dynovox communication device to communicate but is still encouraged to try to use her own voice throughout her school

day. Abby requires a learning environment free from distractions for success. Abby has an IEP and receives special services in this 7:1:4 classroom setting. This setting is able to provide Abby with the support she needs to meet her goals and individual needs.

Rachel has Retts Syndrome, a syndrome found mainly in females. She also is diagnosed on her IEP with multiple disabilities. Rachel is currently 8.3 months old and is a Caucasian female. Rachel shows signs of significant cognitive delays and is completely non-verbal. She communicates via eye gaze, communication switches, and body language. Rachel's primary communication system at this point are two, "little mack" switches that are velcroed to the table. These switches can be programmed to say and request different things, for example, yes/no, more/finished. Rachel will often moan to try to verbalize communication; she will also scream and laugh when over stimulated. She often will cry and periodically will appear to lose control of her body, which will look like her slumping over even when standing at times. She has frequent seizures which drain her and will cause her to become extremely fatigued to the point where she may need to rest for many hours which can affect her school day. Rachel requires a learning environment free from distractions for success. Rachel has an IEP and receives special services in this 7:1:4 classroom setting. This setting is able to provide Rachel with the support she needs to meet her goals and individual needs.

Sam is 9.5 years of age and is a male student with Cerebral Palsy. He uses a wheelchair for a majority of his day but enjoys getting out and stretching a few times a day. He loves watching and socializing with his peers, as well as joking and rough housing. Sean cannot verbally communicate however he uses a communication system with the use of his pupils

through a DynoVox EyeMax system. At times Sam will show signs of non-compliance which looks like him ignoring the staff member working with him and even taking Sam into the classroom side room for less attention and distraction in hopes for him to focus better. Sam is a fun and cheery kid who enjoys life and has an extremely involved and supportive family and home life.

Through this study, I will collect data on the effects of play on literacy instruction on the students through the use of interviews, observations and personal note taking. More distinctively, I will work with all three students one time per week for the half hour work block; in all, each student will have eighteen work sessions working with the teacher-researcher. During these sessions, the incorporation of different types of play within their work tasks will assist me to rule out what doesn't work with each individual student and what generated a positive outcome. For example, some types of play that will be incorporated for these students to better develop letter recognition skills may be practicing letters in sensory based materials, playing letter recognition games such as memory or go fish, and finger painting the alphabet. The goal I am trying to reach is to discover what types of play assist students with severe disabilities best help them develop their literacy skills.

In addition to observing my students, I plan to interview six teachers at the school, one per week over the six week period, to find out what types of play the teachers are incorporating into their every day lessons to assist and engage their own students with disabilities in their literacy learning. Through conducting this research, I hope to find new strategies that I have not yet noticed and learn how to adapt them to my own instruction to support student learning.

Rationale

I chose to study Abby, Rachel and Sam because throughout my research of the literature related to the topic of teaching severely disabled students, I have discovered that there is little research that related to students with severe disabilities in relation to play on their literacy development. In 1990, Linder recognized that there needed to be more research examining play and young children with disabilities in both qualitative and quantitative research. I will study the effects of play on literacy instruction of Abby Rachel and Sam. As Madray and Catalano (2010) state, "play [was] the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul" (p. 11).

I have selected Abby, Rachel and Sam because they are three of my students who show great potential in responding well to play infused literacy learning. Also, I chose them because they are extremely different learners with contrast strengths, weaknesses and learning abilities. Some examples of play that I intend to incorporate into this study are games, songs/phonemic awareness activities, kinesthetic infusion, puppets, pretend and dramatic play, and sensory activities.

Summary

I believe that it is important to explore what types of play incorporated into the literacy goals of students with severe disabilities' helps them to achieve their fullest potential in their literacy development. Through this research study, I hope to have positive outcomes with each of my diverse students, which will assist enhance my skills as a special educator with Abby, Rachel and Sam and other students I encounter as I continue teaching. I anticipate that positive

outcomes from this research will assist all of my students reach their educational goals and expand their literacy development.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Through my experience teaching students with special and severe needs, it is often clear that I need to alter my instruction to best reach them, helping them to be engaged with learning and motivated to interact with their instruction to ensure learning is actually taking place. Play is one activity students with severe needs enjoy and a way they can be motivated throughout their school days. During this study, I plan to incorporate play activities into the work and instructional goals of three of my students in order to attempt to motivate and engage them.

My research questions are:

- How can play assist students with severe disabilities succeed with their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition
- What types of play assists students with severe disabilities develop their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?

In order to situation the context of my research, I have reviewed and evaluated literature related to play and its impact on literacy development and learning within the classroom. I have also researched the literature related to students with severe disabilities and their learning processes.

Play and the Impact on Learning

Although it is important to acknowledge the great theorists related to the development of this topic, it is important to acknowledge the definition of play in itself and how it has evolved. As Fox writes regarding the extensive definitions in existence about play,

“In terms of young children and play, the following definitions from Webster's are useful: light, brisk, or changing movement (e.g., to pretend you're a butterfly) ; to act or imitate the part of a person or character (e.g., to play house) ; to employ a piece of equipment (e.g., to play blocks); exercise or activity for amusement or recreation (e.g., to play tag) ; fun or jest, as opposed to seriousness (e.g., to play peek-a-boo or sing a silly song) ; the action of a game (e.g., to play duck-duck-goose) “ (Back-to-Basics: Play in Early Childhood, para. 4).

Play can be an extremely controversial topic even in its definition, let alone the controversial issue of incorporating play into the classroom.

Grugeon (1999) found that play is one of the linguistic contexts thorough which children attain literacy and language. Grugeon pointed out that students can play with language outside of the classroom, which can have a positive effect on their in classroom learning. The study was conducted by student teachers who wanted to see what types of play was carried out both inside and outside of the classroom by students. After observing the students during multiple recess sessions on the playground, the teacher-researchers concluded that students use many types of play outside of the classroom, which then assists in their literacy achievement in the classroom. Types of play the students used outside consisted of rhyming while skipping, clapping games,

jokes, songs, and chanting while jumping rope. The enthusiasm for playing with language sparked Grugeon's interest to carry the students' playfulness into the classroom to drive her instruction, and to create learning opportunities that would motivate the students. For example, she encouraged her primary grade students to be playful and write their own versions of nursery rhymes and introduced them to new poetry. Grugeon also recognized the students' repertoire for rhymes and jokes and encouraged them to use oral story telling. Through observations and field notes, the teacher-researchers were able to bring what the students knew and practiced into the learning environment to best relate to the students.

Neuman and Roskos (1990) conducted a study of how literacy enriched play enhanced preschoolers' literacy development. The general aim of the study was to see how a specifically designed print environment might influence children's literacy activities during play. The researchers took two preschool rooms and redesigned the physical play environments. They first separated the play areas to make them more distinct, different, separate and dramatic from each other. The researchers labeled the areas as post office, block area, library center, art area, kitchen center and office center. They separated the areas with the use of cupboards and bookshelves to offer a significant separation of the areas from one another. They incorporated a large amount of text into each area, through the use of labels and pictures at eye level and other props found in the designated areas. Next they incorporated a number of props and literacy elements into each play area and made sure to place labels and literacy elements at student eye level. The props at each center were selected first and foremost based on child safety. They then chose props based on their authenticity, or whether or not the child would find that prop in their natural environment. The researchers were geared more towards using real props rather than pretend or made forms. The props were chosen based on their utility, or if the students would or would not

likely be familiar with these props. Props were grouped together based on their use. For example, in the post office area, stamps, envelopes pens and paper were made available to address and send letters.

Throughout the study the students were both observed face-to-face and on video. In their findings, Neuman and Roskos concluded that throughout their observations, literacy (including reading, writing and attending to text) became more purposeful through the incorporation of such literacy enriched play settings and props, as well as literacy became more situated. For example, two students in this study played office, one student went around getting signatures on a clip board, playing “sign up” while the other student sat at his office desk. Then, both boys pretended to enter the names at the computer. This was a purposeful way of displaying what they knew about literacy and incorporating their literacy learning with play.

In terms of the literacy becoming more situated, before the changes in the classroom, there was little visual cueing for these students to rely on. After the changes in classroom structure were made, the students paid more attention to the texts made available to them. For example, in the kitchen area, the students were playing and one student asked another student to make her a grilled cheese sandwich. The student responded by saying that she would look at one of the boxes to follow the recipe on the back of the box. This allowed the students to make greater use of their play time through the use of reading and writing. Students were using more reading, writing and overall attending to text to incorporate into their play activities to solve crimes, fight fires and act like Ghostbusters.

The authors made a great point that before any changes were made to the classroom environment, the students had to rely on their own resources to create contexts for literacy interactions in play. Neuman and Roskos found that literacy in play became more role defined

and interactive. The inclusion of materials incorporated into the play centers sparked role taking and the use of more literacy infested materials and props. This study was conducted for a two week period of time prior to the interventions taking place. An observational procedure was used and each child's action and language was recorded. The researchers observed and videotaped play time within the classroom to observe the use of reading, writing and attending to text during play times. Following the room interventions, no observations took place to allow time for adjustment to the changes. After this four week period, videotaping and observational procedures took place to determine the impact on the students' literacy demonstrations. Neuman and Roskos focused on qualitative analysis to describe student engagement with the literacy infused centers.

Stinnett (2010) discussed a study conducted by Wohlwend (2007) that incorporated play into a kindergarten classroom. The study took place in a mid-western full day kindergarten classroom over the span of a few months. Wohlwend observed the three groups of kindergarteners, noticing what types of play they used and how they assisted in the development of the students. The three groups displayed consistent favorite themes: The "Abbie Wannabes" who liked to play teacher, the "just guys" who explored materials and design tools, and the "Disney Princess Players" who animated dolls and acted out stories about famous Disney Princess movies. Stinnett concluded that the students, "play to read" and, "read to play", "design to play" and, "play to design" and, "write to play" and, "play to write". Reading to play and playing to read involved students reading and playing as they pretend to be teachers while reading books and charts. During these activities students used expressive and exaggerated reading, and flipped books around to display illustrations to imaginary and pretend students. Designing to play and playing to design involved students taking over a space in the classroom to

design and play with their own creative projects. The activities appeared to be disconnected from goals of typical school literacy. Writing to play and playing to write involved students collaborating to revise preferred texts. For this, students incorporated dolls, puppet shows and plays. Stinnett (2010) concluded that permitting play in classrooms for younger students is a political move and that invites popular culture in as well as individual creativity, and social improvisation.

Saracho (2002) conducted a qualitative study to research the roles teachers assume to support their students literacy development during play. The participants in the study were five kindergarten teachers and their students from the SW of the US. Data collection included videotapes of the teachers and their interactions with their students during play in the classroom. Saracho observed different types of conversations between students and teachers in the play settings including being a discussion leader, story teller, examiner, instructional guide, informer, learning center monitor, and decision maker. The results of this study indicated that literacy development was determined by the teachers who develop literacy learning environments. Saracho expressed the importance of incorporating literacy into the classroom in multiple structured environments, including structured play time. According to Saracho, emergent literacy in a literacy enriched environment allows teachers to grant their students innumerable opportunities for practice in reading, writing, listening and speaking. The author also states that teachers are responsible for understanding their teaching roles developing children's literacy, even when it comes to spontaneous play.

Liu (2008) investigates the importance of play in literacy development and noted the following:

The major educational and research implications of this study are that play is at the center of children's connections to the world, and has a crucial impact upon children's confluent development; the stages of play correspond with the stages of children's development in the behavioral/physical domain (the physical well-being and motor skills), the affective/emotional domain, the cognitive/intellectual domain (language and thought), and the social/cultural domain; the multi-dimensions of play correspond with the multi-dimensions of emergent literacy; educational play activities may take many forms, and the educational play tied up with the literacy-related play activities and environment enhance the quality and quantity of emergent literacy in the young child; research literature confirms the strength, appeal, and fruitfulness of the play-literacy relationship, and calls upon the environmental enrichment for purposes of literacy development; the rich and multilayered nature of play and early literacy development in all of its complexity challenges parents, caregivers, teachers, educators, and administrators as literacy facilitators who handle how literacy is acquired, learned or taught in a literacy-related play and developmentally appropriate environment. (pp.14-15).

Liu also highlights the different types of play and their connections to literacy development. In terms of dramatic play and literacy, Liu (2008) cites this type of play most closely linked to children's literacy development. She writes that children first direct objects to communicate thoughts, then they assume a variety of roles to isolate meaning from the objects. During play episodes, young children generally engage in speech play to explore the numerous values in their language, maneuvering their actions with verbal descriptions. Speech play encourages the development of metalinguistic attentiveness, which initiates literacy as young children become conscious of the rules in their language. The social nature of play also develops intellectual development, of which sharing meaning through language is important. The

inseparability of language and cognitive development corresponds with social play and emergent literacy. Children also gain the opportunity to share meaning with a partner in social pretend play and thus, work collaboratively and cooperatively.

Lev Vygotsky was one of the most influential theorists/psychologists of the twentieth century whose work significantly impacted the topic of play. As Duncan and Tarulli (2011) express in their writing in association with Vygotsky, the authors note that Vygotsky's study of play is a crucial portion of his cultural-historical theory of psychology, with essential inference for comprehending development and education during the preschool years. As Leong and Bodrova (2001) stated, "At the core of Vygotsky's theory, called the Cultural-Historical Theory, is the idea that child development is the result of the interactions between children and their social environment. These interactions include those with parents and teachers, playmates and classmates, and brothers and sisters. They also involve relationships with significant objects, such as books or toys, and culturally specific practices that children engage in the classroom, at home, and on the playground" (Pioneers in Our Field: Lev Vygotsky –Playing to Learn, para. 3).

Fox (2007) explores Jean Piaget as a theorist who contributed to the topic of play. As Fox notes, Piaget claimed that play was just for pleasure, and while it allowed children to practice things they had previously learned, it did not necessarily result in the learning of new things. Piaget also based his theories on four stages of development: sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational.

As Stinnett (2010) notes, recent research or modern theories regarding play suggest that enriching a child's literacy environment through the incorporation of play can in fact assist in literacy retention. Stinnett also suggests that the more engaged and motivated students are through play within their learning, the more likely students are to succeed at faster rates with

greater achievement and that those who are against play within the classroom argue that with the limited time provided for instruction each day, there simply is no room for play to be imbedded within the tight curriculum focused day. As Stinnett (2010) stated:

“The pressure for acceleration in schools is compounded by national policies that measure learning by tested isolated skills in individual learners. According to those with these expectations, the serious business of learning is to include mastering literacy and numeracy, not playing around with puppets and paper airplanes” (p.74).

There are multiple and valid points to the thinking of theories from both sides of the controversial issue of the incorporation of play within the classroom in attempt to increase and enhance child development.

Teaching Students with Severe Disabilities

Teaching students with severe disabilities can be challenging and yet, very rewarding. Students with disabilities can have difficulties playing, whether it involves social interaction with others or even playing alone in an appropriate manner. Based on my prior and current teaching experiences, I am a constantly learning about the best practices of teaching my students who are severely disabled. As the students who enter my classroom are diverse and forever changing, so are my teaching styles and practices in order to best reach my and my students success. There is limited research conducted on play and its impact on students with severe special needs and more specifically on students with severe special needs and their literacy development.

Vaughn, Denton and Fletcher (2010) explored studies that uncover the intensive interventions used to assist severely disabled students with reading difficulties. The researchers examine multiple studies in which they explore different intensities in Response To Intervention

(IDEA, 2004) to best assist students with special needs. For example, Vaughn, et al, reviewed a study by Iversen, Tunmer, and Chapman (2005) related to group size and included multiple groups of random students to detect if the variable of changing of group size effected literacy learning. They found that group size does matter and greatly affected student performance as smaller group instruction offered more individual attention and thus an improvement in student learning.

Another part of RTI that is included in Vaughn's (et. al, 2010) work is the importance of making interventions for readers who are severely disabled more intensive. The teacher researchers in this study explored multiple studies in this area and reports on multiple studies found in other diverse resources. They found that it is significantly important for these students to receive high levels of engaging activities and receive explicit instruction. They also determined that it was important to provide extended opportunities to practice the necessary skills and provide extensive feedback.

Erickson and Koppenhaver (1995) explored the teaching students with high needs by incorporating the use of technology and assisting physically and mentally impaired students by modifying their ways of communications to encourage their involvement. The researchers studied two students: Erica, a non-verbal, non ambulatory student living with cerebral palsy (CP) and Casey, a non-verbal student with CP, but who had use of her hands. Erica was given a communication device through which she could better declare her wants, needs and choices. Through the use of visuals and this device, Erica was able to do so much more than she was able to do before, and an open line of communication has opened. Through the use of this device, she was able to become a literacy learner and participate in group activities.

Casey who also was living with CP, was non-verbal, but unlike Erica, had no functional use of her hands. Because of these impairments, Casey was limited to what she could do with her literacy and language abilities; however, she was able to communicate limited language through eye gaze, indicating simple answers such as, “yes and no.” Casey could also at times use a communication switch to respond to questions or make comments.

Erickson and Koppenhaver (1995) offer insight to assist in special educators in feeling less frightened about teaching and connecting to this student population and be more motivated in helping them succeed. The researchers stated several tips: work closely with the classroom speech language pathologist, they can assist the teacher with the use and implementation of technological devices that teachers may not be familiar with. Also, do not equate physical impairments with intelligible abilities, and always remember to increase wait time for students with disabilities due to processing delays and use of the technological devices. Erickson and Koppenhaver also recommended to make activities easy to understand and sometime predictable in order to increase motivation and self confidence, and encourage students with and without disabilities to work together and interact.

Bray and Cooper (2007) studied twelve preschool students with special needs ranging from 48-84 months of age with an array of disabilities including autism, Down’s syndrome and severe speech delays to learn more about their play skills in both mainstream and special education settings. The researchers observed each child’s free play for 15 minutes in the playgrounds of each setting during play recess times, providing two play samples for each child. The observer played a passive, non-intrusive role. A written diary method was used to declare the participants’ choices, behaviors and interactions. The researchers used the Knox Revised Preschool Play Scale and Lunzer Scale of Organization of Play Behavior as the assessments.

The findings suggested that play-age scores indicated that the children played at a developmental level below their chronological age. While the extent to which children engaged in play, especially gross motor play, did not appear to differ between the special education and mainstream settings, children did appear more likely to engage in pretend play in the mainstream setting. The children may have engaged in additional developmental pretend/symbolic play in the mainstream setting. Bray and Cooper (2007) recognized that play was crucial for the children's development and that it served as a medium for therapy and teaching.

Conclusion

My review on the literature has helped me realize that it is important to incorporate play into a classroom of any kind, and that play in connection with literacy learning can be beneficial to students of diverse abilities and disabilities. Also, through my research, I have learned that it takes many teaching strategies and modifications to reach students with severe disabilities.

Whether it is simple modifications, learning how to program or implement complex technological communication devices, or offering more individual teaching instruction, every little bit helps when working with students with special needs.

Through this research, I have explored extensively multiple theorists with different views on the topic of play, many different credible authors who have different views on the definition and carrying out of play in the classroom as well as authors who explore different aspects of play in relation to literacy learning within the classroom.

Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

In this chapter, I discuss the process how I will carry out this study of incorporating play and literacy when working with students with severe special needs. In this chapter I go into detail about each participant in the study and the specialized school's focus and expectations. I also discuss the methods I will use to collect data—the observation and interview processes, and how I will analyze the data to determine how integrating play into my instruction impacted each individual student.

Research Questions

I have designed this study to explore two questions:

- How can play assist students with severe disabilities succeed with their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition
- What types of play assists students with severe disabilities develop their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?

Study Environment and Proposed Participant

The three proposed participants attend a private school in western New York that caters to students with significant disabilities who require more individualized support. All of the students served at the school typically have mental retardation and other disabilities, including

degenerative conditions, emotional problems, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and other severe disabilities. Students are not recruited for programs at this school. They're placed in either ten- or twelve-month educational classes as determined by their individual school districts. Teachers and support personnel review each child's placement annually.

The largest service at the school is the Day Program, which includes preschool and school age programs. The staff—teachers, aides and clinicians—support nearly 550 children and young adults who range in age from birth to 21 years old. The students come from ten counties and 50 school districts throughout western New York. The school is made up of three main campuses, the primary level campus at one location and the intermediate and high level campuses at another location (separate buildings but next to one another). The school also rents an additional building with an indoor track for exercise purposes and a full kitchen for cooking group activities.

Because the students embody an array of complex disabilities, teachers do not follow one specific curriculum. The one universal functional curriculum teachers do follow throughout the school is to prepare students for independence outside of the school setting and into the community; to teach and scaffold these students the necessary life skills needed to increase their independence. Many of the students have different goals and levels of independence due to the diversity in the severity of their disabilities. Some students will be able to be placed into a less restrictive environment after they receive the services and specialized support needed, some students will continue in the education their entire education career until twenty one years of age and then be placed into an adult program or group home. Some students will be placed into classrooms in which they will work on many academic skills and learn to write paragraphs and

papers, other students who have more physical disabilities will work on simply maintaining eye gaze to attend to a story.

Students who are fifteen and older must have a transition plan, which they start at the age of fifteen, to begin determining what plans the family has for life after graduation. This transition plan is required by New York State Education Department to be delineated in the students' IEP. The school also has a Practical Assistance with Life Skills (PALS) program in place for the students to practice life skills that better increase their independence with work skills. The school has a rented workshop that students visit for half hour to one hour increments, and practice and develop working skills such as stuffing and sealing envelopes, learn how to fix miscellaneous things, go out into the community (such as Meals on Wheels and Lollypop Farm), help shop for the schools groceries, and many more community based instruction outings.

There is a large fitness program in an additional building that is rented by the school to offer additional exercise programs to the intermediate and high school students with programs such as zumba, aerobics, weight lifting, and others. The building also offers a full kitchen in which students can learn and try different cooking experiences such as cooking, baking, dish washing, measuring, cleaning, and eating life skills that are important to increase everyday life skills.

As students progress in age, they are most likely to be found less inside the classroom during the school day and more likely to be found out in the community working on developing their independence and association with the outside world. Community Based Instruction (CBI) trips are purposely imbedded and designed for students based on the skills that remain needing more advancement. These teachable outings are created and assigned by specific PALS teachers

who work and are dedicated to the program. Although the curriculum of the programs is not prescribed, it serves as an extremely functional tool for this population of students as it can be designed to the specific needs and development of each particular student involved. As Rutherford and Quinn (1999) wrote, “a functional educational curriculum is one that allows the program to meet a student’s individual academic, vocational, social and behavioral needs” (p. 80). The authors express the importance of community based experiences for students with disabilities as well as job related social and life skills to improve development and increase independence and help them to adjust to possibly become a part of society.

The proposed study participants are two female (Abby and Rachel) and one male (Sam) who are in my 7:1:4 special education classroom. All three participants are Caucasian; one female participant (Rachel) is seven years eleven months old, one is eight years (Abby), three months old. Both female students are age equivalent to the third grade level. Sam is nine years and five months old and the age equivalency of a fourth grade student.

All three students reside in suburban areas located in western New York and live at home with their birth parents and siblings. All three participants have IEPs with an array of diverse goals. However, all three have some type of literacy goals: Abby’s and Sam’s literacy goals include letter recognition, while Rachel’s literacy goal includes character identification. The goals were written by each student’s special education teacher using the previous year’s goals and implemented for the current school year after being brought to their Committee of Special Education (CSE) meeting.

All of the participants also have goals developed in other areas as well, whether it is speech goals, occupational and physical therapy goals, social, personal hygiene or life skill goals,

or goals in other academic based areas. All three students show signs of non-compliance during certain demand activities, especially during work tasks which are a time for them to focus and work on their IEP goals across all areas.

My Positionality as a Researcher

I am a 28 year old Caucasian female teacher who lives in an urban area in western New York. Currently, I am in my third year teaching at the school in which this study will take place. After the completion of my bachelor's degree in English literature with a certification in general education and students with disabilities grades 1-6 in May of 2009, I began teaching that following February at the school,. I began working at this specialized alternative school in 2003 as a teacher's aide and worked my way up to a teacher.

Working in this setting has offered me many opportunities over the years to experience working with students with diverse diagnoses and disabilities including students with mental retardation, autism, emotionally disturbed, physically impaired and medically frail, visually impaired, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and most commonly multiply disabled. Currently, I teach in a 7:1:4 classroom: 7 students, 1 teacher, 4 aides; however, I currently have only five students and three female aides in my room. My students range in age from seven to nine years of age, and have a wide range of disabilities and many are classified as multiple disabilities.

As a teacher-researcher, how I create my own educational philosophy molds all instruction that I carry out in my own classroom. It is my job as a special educator to engage my students in all areas of their demands, and get to know them personally to discover in what ways

they learn best. It is also my job as their teacher to push them towards independence through the use of direct instruction and scaffolding. When I think back to my own educational career as a learner, I mostly remember the lessons that were most engaging for me, and the teachers who taught those lessons; the teachers who took the time to get to know their students and find new and appealing ways to introduce lessons that their students will recall for years to come.

I recognize that our students count on my colleagues and me for their own success, and the way to do this is to know them on an in depth level. I want to be the teacher remembered for years to come as well. I welcome my students' parents into our classroom and encourage open and consistent communication with them on a daily basis. Successful learning begins in the home much like the classroom, and when the parents are supportive of the teaching occurring in school, the chances for success are significantly greater. I believe that students learn best through cooperative collaborative learning; learning in small groups through modeling and example from one another. There needs to be a set, predictive and welcoming learning environment that is safe and inviting for students to learn in. Students need to be reinforced throughout their day in order to be intrinsically motivated to want to learn. I believe that even the simplest lessons can be great lessons. I believe that in the area of teaching, we are always adapting and searching for new ways to advance our instruction. As a teacher, I welcome constructive criticism and am consistently self monitoring and evaluating my own instruction.

I am currently a graduate student at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. I am in my final year of my graduate studies, working on my master's degree in childhood literacy education. I believe that anyone can be successful at literacy learning, even if they have special needs. Students all learn all content areas in different ways, and as a teacher of special education of students with severe needs, it is my job to teach to the students and know what

helps my students to be successful. Literacy learning is not just knowing how to read and write; it's about also learning how to speak, and how to listen.

For the students in my classroom, it's about all of the literacy components to help them move forward to the goal of someday learning how to recite letters or words or writing letters. Literacy is learned through steps in which children learn at different stages and paces. For the most meaningful literacy learning, students need to feel comfortable within the classroom; a safe and welcoming environment needs to be made for the best learning to take place. Also, literacy instruction needs to be enthusiastic and praise needs to be present. Differentiated instruction needs to take place as all students learn in different ways and at different paces based on their abilities. It is important for literacy instruction to incorporate multiple forms of literacy into instruction, such as read alouds for example. I incorporate read alouds frequently into my instruction for my students to enhance their listening and attention to text skills. Lastly, modeling and scaffolding as well as comprehension strategies need to be used to assess learning and ensure that instruction is being retained, as well as to know how to guide instruction.

I decided on this research topic based on the students in my own classroom and my drive to further my experiences as an educator to these students with special needs. The three study participants are all my students whom I have worked with since September 2011.

Data Collection

My intention is to collect data through the use of observation, interviews, and documented daily reflections in a research journal.

Interviews

Through the use of interviews (see Appendix A) with special education teachers who incorporate play daily into their educational settings, I hope to gain a better understanding of the types of play the special education teachers use with their students. I created the interview questions to discover what types of play are incorporated throughout this school and what types of play teachers of students with diverse needs find to be most efficient to use within their own classrooms. Through the gathering of this information, I can apply it to my own instruction to better my teaching of students of different disabilities, however this information will be used for my personal growth as a teacher, and not apply to this study. I plan to align my interviewing process in relation to the advice of Seidman (2006); I will listen to the interviewee and follow up on what he or she discloses. I will listen more, talk less and ask real and relative questions. I will also ask open ended questions to conduct interviews that are meaningful and subject to the interviewees past practices and experiences (Seidman, 2006). These interviews should last approximately 15-20 minutes and will take place in the classroom of the interviewee. The interviews will be audio taped.

Observations

In addition to interviews with special education teachers, I plan to take to observe Abby, Rachel and Sam as they engage in play activities. I will complete weekly observations of each student throughout the six week study (see Appendix C). I will work with the three participants

on a scheduled rotation, once a week per student, which will total eighteen work sessions, six work sessions per student. I want to observe each student's progress with his or her literacy based individualized IEP goals. I plan on incorporating diverse types of play into the students' literacy work sessions, one type of play over a two week period, and thus incorporating a total of three types of play total for each student over the six weeks to track progression toward the IEP goals. I anticipate that I will modify the play activities where and as needed.

I plan to observe each student once a week over the six week data collection period for one half hour work session each time. I will use the information from each work period to determine if and how to modify the play activity for the next work session. During the work session, I will document the students' behaviors and responses to the play activities and any progress the student makes from week to week, to assist me in how to move forward and set the student(s) up for success the following work session.

I will fill out two documents per work session per child: one document is the classroom goal data sheet which all classroom staff fills out on a daily basis. This goal sheet contains the date, the exact wording of the goal as written on the students' IEP; a place for yes or no if the goal, benchmark or objective has been achieved for that day, the amount of prompting used to offer student support, and any other comments necessary. The other goal sheet will be the Appendix B document which will declare the student, date, goal being worked on, type of play used to enhance the goal, the students response to the play infused goal, and any additional comments necessary.

In addition, I plan to track each student's progress with the use of his or her data goal collection sheets (see Appendix B) from daily classroom use, and taking detailed notes about each student during and after each work session.

Research Journal

I also plan to track my students' behaviors and my own reflections in a research journal. In this journal, I will reflect on my observations of students and partake in free writing to expand on my thoughts, what I have learned and where I might go next in terms of play activities and/or instruction.

Data Analysis

Interviews

Questioning and discovering what play activities my colleagues carry out in their own classrooms may help me advance in my teaching skills by gaining knowledge of new ideas that I can use with my students.

I will engage in a process of reading and rereading the teachers' responses to the interview questions to see what patterns, if any, exist between and among the teachers' responses. From the teachers' responses, I will create a sheet of the various types of play activities the teachers use with their students' different disabilities, cognitive and age levels to enhance the students' literacy development.

After I have completed the analysis, I will distribute a handout to all teacher interviewees who participated in this study to provide them with different ideas of play activities that they might wish to implement with their students. I will keep the individual participant's information confidential and only share the play activities.

Observations and Field Notes

I plan on using what I take away from these observation notes to analyze behaviors of the students during the sessions to determine how to access their progress or lack of progress to decipher how I will set them up for success in the next session. I will use these observation notes to modify further activities related to each child's potential and specifically to their literacy goal work being worked on.

Research Journal

I plan on examining the results of my research journal before each new session with the students. At the time the research journal is documented, it is used for a free write or to expand on my thinking of how the students are progressing through the study. It is also used to connect the findings of the observations and interviews and to assist in the preparation of the next session with the student(s). After each observation, a research journal log will be documented, and this log will be conducted carefully and touch on many areas within the study. The log will be kept in a safe and confidential place and will be examined before each new study with the student(s) to clarify where the goal was left off at and what needs to occur for the next session. This log

will be useful to document notes that I have to reflect on the previous sessions and ideas to write down reflecting the next session to follow. This will assist me in the organization of my thoughts to best prepare my activities for each session for each student.

Procedures

Week 1: Start work sessions with the first participant. Make observations and take notes during each 30 minute session. Interview one special education teacher.

Week 2: Continue work sessions with first participant. Make observations and take notes during each 30 minute session. Interview one special education teacher.

Week 3: Start work with the second participant. Make observations and take notes during each 30 minute session. Interview one special education teacher.

Week 4: Continue work sessions with second participant. Make observations and take notes during each 30 minute session. Interview one special education teacher.

Week 5: Start work with the third participant. Make observations and take notes during each 30 minute session. Interview one special education teacher.

Week 6: Finish work session with third participants. Make observations and take notes during each 30 minute session. Interview one special education teacher.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

As a teacher-researcher, I am determined to conduct this study in an ethical and unbiased manner. Throughout the study, I will stay committed to the objectives and purposes study. I will collect data about the students' behaviors, responses and progress as they occur. My process if data collection will be authentic, accurate, valid and reliable.

To make certain I achieve a level of trustworthiness throughout this study, I will use a variety of data collection including field notes, interviews and observations over the six week research period. I will observe the three participants weekly and examine what is working for them in terms of the literacy goals infused with play, and if it fails to work enhance each

students' development, modify and make necessary changes to attempt further success in their literacy goal areas.

I will provide persistent observation throughout this study with conducting an extensive number of interviews (six interviews) and multiple observations of each student (each student one times per week for thirty minutes). Throughout the research process, I intend to take descriptive and detailed notes of my process, which will add to the dependability of my methods.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study might be that there is only one teacher-researcher actively involved in this study. This can be challenging on the teacher-researcher in the way that there is no one to allocate work to and share ideas for more in depth analysis and thinking.

Another second potential limitation of this study could be the time frame of the study. A six week period for students with severe disabilities to show growth will be challenging as they can require a longer period of time to show progress.

Summary

I will track their literacy IEP goals and implemented with different types of play for all three study participants. I will work over t a six week period to determine if and what types of play assist in the overall literacy development of the three students with extensive disabilities and impairments. In addition to this study, I (rewrite into first person) will also interview six special

education teachers of diverse classrooms throughout the specialized school to gain a better understanding of different types of play being carried out within diverse classrooms.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to gather information about what happened when I implemented play into my students' literacy work sessions. My intent was to track their behaviors to see if play could assist their development. Through the study, I explored what the students were practicing in terms of their literacy development, what I noticed about that motivates them to learn, and then applied these interests in the form of play to see if tying these things together might assist their learning and enhance their development.

Throughout the study, I sought to answer two research questions: How can play assist students with severe disabilities succeed with their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition? What types of play assists students with severe disabilities develop their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?

I worked with three of my six students with special needs in my current classroom in the specialized special education school. For this study, I chose one male student, Sam (all names Pseudonyms) who has been diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy (CP) and other cognitive delays. I also chose two female students: Rachel, a student diagnosed with Rett's syndrome and displays

severe cognitive delays, and Abby who has Coffin-Siris Syndrome and significant cognitive delays.

I had the opportunity to work with each student every day for two full school weeks, or ten days; a half hour work session each day. Each week I implemented a form of play, therefore each student had a total of two types of play implemented into his/her literacy goal work. At first I had planned to see each student once a week over the full six weeks; however, as I observed my students' initial progress, I decided that the chances of seeing positive results would be greater if I were to see the students more often on consecutive days. The total study took six weeks, seeing each student for two weeks.

In addition, I conducted six interviews, one per week, to find out what types of play the teachers in my school were incorporating into their every day lessons to assist and engage their own students with disabilities in literacy learning. Conducting this part of the research helped me become aware of strategies that I did not yet know or practice in my own instruction and encouraged me to reconstruct or reconsider my own thinking about my own instruction.

In this chapter, I present the three students' individual case studies and behaviors. The case studies helped me address my first research question. After presenting each case study, I provide a cross-case analysis in which I make comparisons between and among the case studies. The cross-case analysis supported my ability to answer the second research question.

Case Studies

Research Question: *How can play assist students with severe disabilities succeed with their literacy related goals, specifically in relation to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?*

Abby

Abby is the most advanced student in my classroom and I was eager to monitor her progress throughout this study to assist me in determining if I needed to alter the ways of the study or not. I first worked with Abby on 1/23/12 during her work session. Abby was working on simple letter identification of letters A-D which is noted on her current Individualized Education Program (IEP). Throughout this year, she had yet to master this goal and has had great difficulty retaining this task.

I decided to use this goal and think about some form of play that would highly motivate Abby. I wanted something that was used for reinforcement for her in the classroom and not something that she interacted with daily and one thing came to mind: play-doh. While Abby has many sensory needs and is highly tactile defensive, play-doh is one product that she is motivated by and thoroughly enjoys. Instead of working on all four letters A-D, I decided that it would be more beneficial for Abby to focus on two letters for this task and two letters for next week's task or play infused letter identification work.

Session One: 1.23.12

I sat Abby down at her regular work spot, at a specialized hydraulic table, facing the wall away from her peers as a way to limit distractions. I also desired to gain her full attention to introduce this task to her and so I put up a visual screen (an athletic mat) to prohibit any further distracters as can easily happen with her. The other students were occupied with their own work

tasks as they sat at different tables throughout the classroom behind Abby's work station. Abby sits in an adapted chair, which is modified for her. The chair is made out of wood, and has a harness attached to it to assist Abby with proper positioning due to her physical impairments and severe scoliosis (curving of the spine). Along with her primary diagnosis of Coffin Siris Syndrome, Abby also has _____ which impacts her by her consistently mouthing her hands as well. She needs constant reminders and redirection to keep her hands out of her mouth area.

I sat down with Abby and offered her simple step directions on what we would be doing today for her work session. To begin, I wanted to first start with what Abby did and did not know in regard to her identification skills of letters A-B. . I placed an enlarged picture of the capitalized letter A in front of Abby and asked her to identify the letter on the page. She pointed at the page and stated, "I." I then pointed to the page and said, "Abby, this is letter A. Can you say A?" Abby responded in a more clear voice, which might be difficult for the unfamiliar ear to hear, "A". I praised her and had her practice pointing to the letter a few more times to have her get accustomed to what we would be doing over the course of the week and to become more familiar with pointing and identifying the letters. After I felt that this practice was complete, I withdrew the paper with the letter A on it and introduced the paper with the letter B. "What letter is this, Abby?" I asked her. She sat in silence for about 10 seconds and then responded, "E." I was quick to correct her with, "Good try Abby, but this is actually the letter B. Let's practice tracing it with our finger." I put my hand on her hand, modeled how to put out the pointer finger and together we traced and practiced the motions of writing letter B. I then asked her, "What letter is this again?" Her response right away was "B," which was reassuring for the moment; however, it takes much reinforcement for Abby to retain new information for long

periods of time. I knew this was only the start to her learning and retaining these letters into her schema.

I wanted to introduce the play-doh to her right away for the sake of our time and schedule together, as well as the sake of her learning. I offered two different colors of play-doh for her to choose from; one red and one blue, and I observed her face light up with excitement. I ask her which color she would like and she responds "blue!" while she pointed to the tub with the red lid. Abby continues to struggle with color identification, everything is blue to her. I was again quick to correct her by clarifying the correct identification of the colors as she pointed and said, "blue!" I hand her the blue play-doh uncovered as she gets it out and rolls it in between her hands, and I then handled the red play-doh. I took out a large, laminated picture of the letter A. I decided that because Abby was so interested in the play-doh that I would need to have her set it aside in order for me to model the task for her. I asked, "Abby, what letter is this, do you remember? We just talked about it" She responded with, "I" once again and I corrected her. "Abby, today we are going to practice the letter A and we are even going to make it out of our play-doh! What do you think about that?!" I asked her in my most positive and exciting voice because I know that she tends to be motivated through this type of interaction. . She did not have the verbalizations to respond to my question but gleamed her bright, enthusiastic smile, which disclosed just how motivated she was.

I pushed the laminated picture of the letter closer and right in front of her. "Let me show you how to make a letter A. First, I am going to make three snakes, one mommy snake, one daddy snake and a baby snake" I say as I rolled the play-doh into three lines, two of the same length and one smaller. "Now I have all of my snakes so we can put them onto our letter. What letter is this again Abby?" I ask and she responded once again, "I." I correct her, "Oh, remember

we are working on letter A, can you say that?" She responded correctly. "Let's practice putting our snake family on the lines to make an A. Let me show you first, then we will do it together." I place one of the larger play-doh lines on the left part of the long side, then do the same with the right and finally the middle connecting line to form the letter accurately. "See, now we have all of our snakes together as a family to make the letter A." Her facial expression indicates that she is very curious. . I perceive her to be somewhat confused as well because she appears to be pondering and slowly processing what is happening, trying to piece it all together.

I then take her hand and help her to make a pointer with her pointer finger. "Let's trace the letter A, ready?" I take her hand and we trace down the left long side, the right long side, and finally the middle connecting line. "You just made the letter A with your pointer!" I exclaim to her. She goes to reach for the play-doh letter to take a piece to manipulate as I redirect her to the task, "No, you can play when we are done, right now we are still working." Her hands return to her lap and we continue. "What letter is this Abby?" "I" she responds. This task helps me realize how I can work help Abby develop her retention skills.

We then practiced making letter B in the same context. We practice her fine motor skills by first rolling the play-doh into our snake like forms, I make one large line, she works on imitating my modeling by somewhat making a smaller one. I then break off another piece to make another smaller one. I then take out the laminated picture to show her how to place the lines of play-doh into the appropriate places. When the letter is fully constructed, I ask her, "Do you remember what letter this is?" She responds with, "E." I quickly remind her that we are now working on the letter B and model with my hands how we will trace the letter. I take a hold of her pointer finger and direct her finger towards the letter. We trace the letter together three times and go over the letter's name. "Abby this letter is B" I tell her as we trace the letter together.

What letter is this?" She responds with, "B". "Great job Abby! You are right!" I praise her in a highly motivated voice. She looks very proud of herself and smiles up at me. She got it right!

I know that her retention of this will take more time for long term results. "Let's practice this a few more times with our tracing. We trace the letters three more times with our fingers together, me holding her hand over the letter. Then I have her try to do it independently, but she struggles as she is distracted with grabbing the play-doh and her fine motor skills are still developing. .

To assess her skills, I take the play-doh and letters out of her sight for less distraction. I return to the laminated letter A and ask her what letter this is. She responds with letter, "I." I soon correct her and move on to assess her recognition of the letter B, which she states is letter, "E." From her responses, I realize that I have some work to enhance her skills on letter identification.

Session Two: 1.24.12

For this session, I started off reminding Abby of what we had done the previous day in regard to letter recognition. I reminded her that the expectation is to look at the letters, make the letters out of play-doh to form our own letters, and that by doing this activity, it will help us to become more familiar with the letters. We start out again, only reviewing the laminated letters without using the play-doh. As I show her the letter A and ask her to identify the letter, she responded again with, "I." I quickly correct her and we practice by stating and pointing at the letter. After she appears to recall the letter, we move on to the play-doh activity. She appears to want to have more control this time around, as she is interacting with the play-doh as I have instructed her to do, to make a snake. She rolls the snake and I ask her to place the play-doh on

the letter. She places it on the laminated paper; however, she does not place it on the exact lines of the letter A. I correct her by showing her the lines using my pointer finger and then hers. I ask her to try to move the play-doh onto the letter so that it can help to construct it. She moves the play-doh piece so that it is touching the letter but does not make an exact line of the A. I place the play-doh onto the line, then complete the play-doh letter by connecting the line with the other two. "Abby, do you remember what letter this is that we just made?" She responds with letter, "I" again, and I correct her, "No Abby, remember, this is letter A. Can you say and trace this letter A?" She holds out her pointer finger and allows my hand to take hers as we trace and say the letter correctly together.

We do this a few more times and then move on to the letter B. She still names the letter as initially as letter, "E" and so we practice tracing and stating the letter B correctly with our fingers. We then move on to our play-doh and she once again helps in the formation of the snake like lines. We put our snake family together to make the B and practice stating the letter. She identifies the letter at the conclusion of this task, which makes me realize that she is more familiar with the letter B than she is with the letter A. I made the connection that she is most likely more familiar with this letter B because her last name begins with the letter B (Abby is her pseudonym name). During the assessment, she once again stated, "I" in place of letter A but stated correctly for letter B.

Session Three: 1.25.12

For this session, I decided to do things a little differently with Abby because we were getting short on time and her limited progress in this area. I wanted to see if she could match the letters with 1:1 correspondence while working on the identification of the letters. I had the same

laminated letters to remain consistent with Abby because this is something that she relies on in her classroom environment; a predictable and consistent routine; however, I did reduce the cards and copied them so that each letter was now a set, but they still looked exactly like the ones she had been previously exposed to, only now they are smaller to fit her table. I have also noticed that her matching skills are pretty good in terms of other things in her work bin such as matching the same pictures, colors and some shapes, so I thought that by doing a matching activity with this task might engage her, followed by the play-doh routine that we had been working on.

To start, I verbally instructed her on the changes in the activity we would be doing for the session, as well as showed her a visual of the cards. Since we sat down, Abby already consistently and repetitively asked me about the play-doh, so I told her that we would be doing this different task to begin, then would be using the play-doh afterwards. I laid out the four cards on her table (one A card and one B card on the left side, one A card and B card on the right) and instructed her to not touch the cards until I said so. She complied and was very interested in them as I laid them out in front of her, two letter A cards and two letter B cards. I reviewed the letters with her and pointed and stated the letter A card on the left side of the table. I asked her to, "find the same" in very simplistic terms that she was familiar with and would understand. She was quick to point to the same letter A match on the right side of her table. I praised her work and then asked her the name of the letter. Abby replied, "I." I quickly corrected her and we practiced looking at the matching cards and repeating the correct name. I placed the letter A card back on the left side to reset the cards and pointed to the letter B card. I asked Abby to find the same card once again; sure enough she pointed to the correlating letter B card on the right side of the table. I praised her for her good work and asked her the name of the letter. Her answer was, "G," a letter that she had yet to recite throughout this process. I felt frustrated with

her responses at this point because of her consistent correct answers with previous tasks and the letter B; I thought for sure she would have identified it correctly.

We moved to our typical play-doh manipulation and identification activity. I took out the normal sized letters that Abby was familiar with and asked her to work on making two daddy snakes and one baby snake to make the letter A. I wanted to examine how her fine motor skills were developing during this task. She did surprisingly well at removing the lid of the play-doh, taking it out and attempting to imitate what I was doing. This task that had been very difficult for her to attend to only two days ago was now not such a difficult obstacle for her. She made the large side of the A or her daddy looking snake but could not place it onto the A in the correct spot as I directed her to do so. I helped her place the play-doh into the correct spots and we finished replicating the letter A together. We traced the A two times with our fingers and I allowed and encouraged her to trace the letter herself. She could not quite do this independently yet as her finger was somewhat all over the place and not tracing the formation of the lines. I then asked her what letter this was and she responded, "I." Something about this letter is just so unfamiliar to her that she just couldn't seem to identify this letter correctly. We discussed that it is not the letter I but the letter A and she repeated, "A."

We moved onto the letter B. I took out the large laminated letter B, point to it and state it, and she did the same. I had a good feeling about this letter for this activity at this point. I asked her what letter she thought this was, and she responded, "B". I was elated with her answer for this was the first time she had gotten this right on the first try! It was a great feeling. I praised her but knew that we had to get back to work with our activity. I handed her the play-doh and she attempted to make the daddy snake again. She did a pretty good job again manipulating the dough with her little hands. I asked her to put the letter B together, but she was

unable to construct the letter. I modeled making the letter with the dough and I traced the letter one time with my pointer finger. "Your turn," I instructed her. She put out her pointer but did not trace the letter, only poked at the letter with her pointer finger. I took her hand and traced the letter using hand over hand assistance. I then again asked her what letter this was and she responded by stating letter B. She had it down! I was so excited that she had made some progress with this activity.

Session Four: 1.26.12

For this session, I decided to have Abby match the cards again as she proved to be effective with this task earlier, yet not quite there with the identification. I laid the cards out in front of Abby and walked her verbally through the process to refresh her memory of what was expected for this task. I relinquished some control over to Abby and asked her to choose the card to start with this time. She picked up the letter B card from the left side of the table. I asked her what that letter was and she answered, "I" and I was quick to correct her response. We practiced pointing and saying the letter B and I asked her to find the same card on the right side of the table, which she was successful at doing. We practiced stating the letter B a few times before moving on to the letter A cards. She told me initially that this letter was, "I" as well, which had me worried because she was showing initial regression in areas for both letters at this point. When I corrected her and we practiced the letter A, I asked her to find the same for the letter A cards. When I asked her to do this this time, I noticed that something was just off with her. She folded her arms and sat there, blankly looking at me. I directed her again and told her that if she finished the task at hand, we could then move on to play with play-doh and do our play-doh letters. She quickly swatted at the cards and put them all on to the floor. I was firm

with Abby at this point, telling her that this behavior was unacceptable as I unclipped her harness holding her upright in her adapted chair, to prompt her to get out of her chair and go pick up the cards that she had cleared from her table.

At this point based on Abby's behavior, I decided to end the activity and pick it up the following day. I have noticed that when Abby decides to portray such minor aggressive behaviors, she will tend to increase such behaviors and escalate to a point of no return and so it is best to discontinue the un-preferred activity for the time being and pick it back up at a later date. At this point however, she would not be moving to a preferred activity but move on to a different type of work so that she does not completely escape the demand activity.

Session Five: 1.27.12

This was the final session that I did with Abby based on the play-doh/letter identification task. I wanted to offer her one more full session to ensure that she received as much instruction as possible before I assessed her on the letters A and B. I decided that because of her behavior the day before with the matching cards that we would approach this in the way previously done with her, with only the large letters and her choosing which letter was which.

I put the letter A in front of her and asked her what letter it was; she responded, "I" which is what she stated the day before. I quickly corrected her and we practiced stating the letter A over and tracing it with our pointer fingers. Then I took out the letter B and did the same. She was quick to identify the letter correctly, and I was quick to praise her successful efforts! I noticed that when tracing, she was much more accurate with her tracing since we began this at the beginning of the week. She was not completely accurate with staying in the lines or on the lines of the letter, but it was a clear improvement in the steadiness of her hand, the stamina of her

focus with holding out her pointer finger, and her alertness and attentiveness of visually attending to the task.

We then moved on to complete the play-doh aspect of the session as we have done in previous sessions. I got out both letters, and we went through the notions of making the snakes and placing them onto the letters to replicate the formations. For the letter A, Abby did a pretty good job once she got on task of replicating it, however she tended to be getting fixated on making other things out of the play-doh rather than the usual snakes that she had been instructed and modeled to do. She needed hand over hand assistance to place the play-doh lines directly onto the lines to make up the A, however since the beginning of the week, she showed improvement when following the one step directions and was more focused on the task and directions. She was not able to correctly identify the letter A when I asked her to do so on the first attempt as she still responded, "I." For the letter B she showed improvement since the primary session with just making the lines ("snakes") and where she placed them onto the letter. She was much more accurate placing the lines and worked much more slowly to attempt a greater accuracy, however still needed a great amount of assistance with the task. She was able to correctly identify the letter on the first attempt when I asked her to identify it, which was a huge accomplishment on her part.

For the assessment for this task, my objective was to see if Abby could accurately match with 1:1 correspondence the letters A and B. My other objective was to see if she could verbally identify the letters A and B. For this task, I had a file folder with only the letters A and B on them, as well as had matching cues made with the letters. Abby's task as I instructed her was to take the file folder and the cues and match the letters together with their matches when I called out the letter name. For example, I would instruct her, "Pick up the letter A card and find same."

After she matched the same, I pointed to each letter and asked her, “What letter is this?” For this task, Abby matched each letter cue perfectly as she correctly matched the letter A card to the same letter A, and the letter B card to the same letter B on the file folder, giving her one hundred percent on this portion of the assessment task. With verbally identifying the letters, she scored a fifty percent as she was able to correctly identify the letter B correctly on the first try; however the letter A was more difficult for her as she identified this letter again as letter I.

Second Task: Abby’s Board Game/letter identification

For this second task, I decided to take a look at Abby’s progress with the first two letters. She seemed to master the letter B, however, the letter A was more difficult for her. For Abby’s second task, I decided to create a board game that would assist in her working on her letter identification of letters A and B, and also introduce the letter C to her as well. For this game, I wanted to incorporate Abby’s known world (i.e., her family, teachers/school life, interests) to engage her with the game, while still engaging her with learning her letters. The game rules had to be extremely simplified because of Abby’s low cognitive level. I would have to assist her with the movement of the game pieces and reading the cards. I would also have to help her understand the directions of the game and carry out the expectations on the cards.

The game can be played with up to four players; however Abby and I would be the only ones playing in this situation. The object of the game is to get to be the player to get to Abby’s home first in time for dinner. On the board game, I included pictures of Abby’s family, home life and interests; the pictures of her home life were requested from the family in which they were eager to participate in. For this game, each player rolls the dice and moves that many spaces forward. If the player lands on a letter “A” space, they take a letter “A” card and

complete the task on the card. The same goes for the letter “B” cards and letter “C” cards. I put predominantly more letter A and B spaces on the board to build on what Abby has been learning and fewer letter C spaces to introduce the letter to her at this point. The cards had an array of different things on them; some simply had the letters A and B for Abby to identify, some had fun things that Abby was working on such as identifying body parts, following simple 1-2 step directions (i.e. stand up and clap three times). The letter C cards were more like wild cards, which had details on them that related to Abby’s world such as, “Uh oh, mom caught you stealing cookies, move back three spaces!” or, “Dad got a flat tire taking you to swimming lessons, move back a space.” These things related to Abby’s real world experiences as they connect to what she knows and therefore, would, I suspected, keep Abby actively engaged with the game. The letter C cards also did have some letter identification cards, however the letters A and B were more heavily based in this task because of the time constraints that are on this study for Abby. For all A, B and C cards, some picture cards were imbedded in the piles which represented the letters and pictures that go along with the letters (i.e., apple with letter A).

Session One: 1.30.12

I knew that Abby would need a lot of simple instruction about how this game would be played and how we would play it together. I placed the game out on Abby’s table and she looked it over. It took her a few minutes to really take a look at it and notice that this was a special game created just for her as her eyes lit up as she noticed and pointed to the pictures. I told her that this was a game just for her and we went through the familiar pictures on the board. I instructed her on how this game would be played and she appeared very excited about it.

I set the cards out in their designated A, B and C spots, placed the die on the center of the board and asked Abby what color player she wanted to be (for the game pieces, I borrowed pieces from another game in our classroom). Abby wanted to be the blue player and I chose red. As we played the game, Abby was very in tuned with learning the process and going through the motions of the game. She visually attended to the game the entire time and her body language showed that she was very engaged. I kept track of Abby's progress on a note pad as we played in terms of her letter identification skills throughout.

For this session, Abby landed on 8 letter A spaces, 5 letter B spaces and 1 letter C space. Out of her 8 letter A cards that she pulled, Abby was instructed to identify the letter A four times, as the remaining four A cards had other miscellaneous directions. For the first letter A identification card, Abby was asked to identify the letter A and she responded, "I." I corrected her and we practiced stating and pointing the letter card four more times. We moved on and continued playing, as she pulled her next letter A card. She identified the letter again as, "I" and we continued as we previously did. For the third and fourth letter A cards pulled, Abby correctly identified both cards on the first try. This was a huge accomplishment for her, being that she had been exposed to the letter A in depth on the previous play-doh task, yet she never mastered the letter A; and on this task, this was her first experience with the game.

For the letter B spaces and cards, she landed on five B spaces, therefore pulling five letter B cards, three of which asked her to identify the letter B. She identified the letter B correctly for all three cards on the first try. Even from the first encounter with this task, Abby showed progress with this task in relation to her being able to identify letters.

For the one letter C card, I thought that it was interesting that she did not offer a response when I asked her to do so, she blankly looked up at me and was silent. For all of the previous

identification, she usually offered some sort of answer, however for this, she did not. We finished the game and Abby ended up winning and getting home to the photo of her house in time for dinner. She was excited about the game and was signing more as we completed it and I instructed her that tomorrow we would play again during her work time. It was nice to see just how engaged and motivated she was with this task. And finishing up this day, I left feeling accomplished and encouraged.

Session Two: 1.31.12

Because of Abby's progress with the game the day prior, I gave her a very basic review of the expectations of the game on this day. Her face lit up just like the day before as she reviewed the pictures of her family again, it was like she had never seen these pictures before, as she gave her typical, "Oooh! Aww!" while pointing to the familiar pictures of her family members on the game board.

For this game, Abby ended up landing on the letter A six times throughout the game, letter B two times throughout the game and not letter C at all. Unfortunately, this game got cut short because of Abby's therapy times on this day being switched, so she probably could have picked and practiced more cards if it weren't for the time constraint. Out of the six letter A cards, Abby pulled three letter A identification cards; for the first she responded with, "I" and was corrected. For the next two letter A identification cards, she responded correctly on the first try, which once again is an accomplishment in itself because it shows that she is retaining this information however at a slow rate, but retaining. The other three letter A cards were not specifically letter identification cards, but were letter/picture card combination cards for Abby to connect the letter A to specific objects that start with the letter A. For these three cards, Abby

picked on card with a picture of an apple on it as well as a small letter A, a picture of an ant, and a picture of an alligator. As she pulled these cards, we practiced stating the letter A and I described the connection with the cards by stating, "Your card has a picture of an apple. Apple begins with the letter A." She once again enjoyed looking through these picture cards as I was hoping that she would make the connection from hearing my descriptions.

For the letter B spaces that Abby landed on, she pulled two letter identification cards. She once again was able to correctly identify both letter B cards on the first try. She landed on no letter C spaces, however, I did and I asked her to identify the letter C represented on my card. She responded with, "I" which is usually what she states when she does not know letter A. I found this to be interesting because maybe this is just the letter she states when she does not know and feels the need to just give an answer when in the moment. I corrected her, and we practiced saying it correctly and pointing three times. As I pulled other letter C cards, I had her practice the picture cards that I pulled that represented the letter C. I happened to pick two picture cards; C is for cat, C is for cup. I read the cards to her and we practiced the letter C again. After this, her physical therapist cut our session short due to some altering of the scheduling on this particular day. We did not finish our game for this session, however, in my perception; we did get some beneficial practice in.

Session Three: 2.1.12

For the third session, I offered a brief introduction of the game, however Abby clearly did not need one as she insisted on helping me set the game up by grabbing the cards and placing them in the appropriate places as she had seen me do the days prior. She also grabbed the game pieces and held them out, non-verbally asking me what color I would like to be. As we began to

play our game, Abby still looked as engaged with the game as she did on the first day. For this session, we actually had enough time to play the game twice, which reinforced Abby's learning.

During the first game Abby landed on letter A spaces eight times, pulling five letter A identification cards. She needed a reminder for that first letter identification card however afterwards, she identified the rest of the letter A cards correctly on the first try. She pulled two picture/letter cards for the letter A and we practiced the connection between the letter and pictures. She landed on letter B spaces four times and pulled only one letter B identification card, however, getting it correct on the first attempt. She also pulled two letter B picture/letter association cards and we practiced them together. She landed on three letter C spaces and all three cards pulled were wild cards which had her follow one step directions such as locating and touching her ears and elbows, and also a fine motor task of taking paper, ripping it into pieces and placing in a small container. She ended up winning the game for this round.

During the second game, Abby landed on letter A spaces seven times and pulled letter A identification cards five out of the seven times. She retained the information from the previous game and identified the letter A correctly on the first try with all of the five cards. I praised Abby's performance for this task and she was so proud of herself; she sat beaming and even joined in with me as I cheered for her. Such a great moment. The remaining two cards pulled from the letter A pile were picture/letter cards. Abby landed on letter B spaces five times and pulled four letter B identification cards. She once again was correct with her identification all four times. The remaining card was to practice tracing the letter B in the air with her finger. She was able to accurately do the first straight line but struggled to be consistent with her accuracy for the two curved lines. I moved her hand (pointer finger out) to the table and had her trace it on the table which seemed to offer her hand more support. We traced the letter B with my hand

over her hand to offer her more support. Abby landed on two letter C spaces and pulled two letter C identification cards. When I asked her to identify the letter C, she responded, "E." Because Abby's speech at times can vary and can be difficult to decipher, I found it interesting that she said this letter this time because she moved from labeling it "I" to now "E." Because E sounds so much like the letter C, I believe that she was making gains in this area. She was not quite there with her accuracy for identifying letter C at this point, but she was showing that she was moving in the right direction. Overall, for this session, I was extremely proud of Abby's performance and her display of success and growth showing.

Session Four: 2.2.12

For this session, I had the game laid out and ready for Abby when it was time for work, this way we could jump right in and get as much practice in as possible for the time that we had. Before beginning this game, I thought a brief review of the letters might help Abby become familiar with the letters quicker and encourage better accuracy for the games entirety. I asked Abby to point to each letter as I stated them; she correctly pointed to B on the first try, and when she pointed to letter A, she first pointed to the letter B but then quickly moved her finger to A as she self corrected herself. For letter C, she grabbed my hand to help her find it and we found the letter together.

During this game, Abby landed on ten letter A spaces, five letter B spaces, and three letter C spaces. Out of the ten letter A spaces, Abby pulled six letter A identification cards, each letter A card she identified correctly on the first try. The remainder of the four cards was made up of three picture/letter cards which we practiced together as well as one directional card. I found it interesting for the picture/letter cards during this game that Abby wanted to be more involved with these, not just have me read the cards to her. For example, one of the cards was

the letter A paired with a picture of an airplane, before I could prompt her, she looked at the card, pointed to it, stated the letter correctly and followed it up by using her signs to sign the word airplane.

Abby alternates between verbally using her words and signing words that she knows; however because her parents long for her to be more verbal, we implement both languages with her in the school setting. I thought this was great to see Abby take more control of her learning and participation in the task to display her learning. Out of the five letter B spaces she landed on, Abby pulled only two letter B identification cards, both she identified correctly on the first attempt. Out of the three remaining B cards, Abby pulled one picture/letter card, which she did not initiate interacting with as she did with the A cards. I prompted her to point to the cards with me and state the letter. She was successful with stating the letter B but possibly did not know the sign for butterfly or had the word butterfly in her vocabulary capability. I stated the word and she sat silent; most likely this word was just too large for her to annunciate. The two remaining B cards were directional cards. Out of the three C spaces, Abby pulled one letter identification card and two wild cards (go back 2 spaces and move ahead three spaces). For identification of the letter C, Abby identified this letter again as letter, "E" and again I corrected her response and we practiced stating the correct letter. As I pulled some C letter identification cards and letter/picture cards for my turns, I reinforced her knowledge by having her practice stating the letter C and connecting the letter with some known pictures. I also worked on scaffolding the information as time went on and modeling identifying the letter on the cards.

Session Five: 2.3.12

For this final session, we began the game as usual. I explained to Abby that this would be the last time we would play the game and I would take notes, but we could continue playing

as a part of her work session. We played the game, Abby landed on a total of five letter A spaces, six letter B spaces, and four letter C spaces. From the five letter A cards pulled, she had to identify the letter A all five times, which she did a great job at and was correct on all five attempts. For the letter B spaces, she had to identify the letter B four times which she did correctly on all first attempts. For the letter C cards, she pulled two letter C identification cards and two letter C picture/letter cards. She once again identified the first letter C card as, "E" as I corrected her response and we practiced the letter correctly. The next letter C card that she pulled she labeled the letter correctly on the first attempt. For the letter/object cards, Abby made a turn around by participating with these during this session. She was quick to point to the letter C on the card, even though she did not immediately label the letter without prompting to do so. Once she labeled the letter correctly, she pointed to the picture of the camel but did not offer a sign or word to go along with it. This made me believe that once again she did not have the word/sign in her schema to label the object on the card. On the other picture/letter card, I held it up and she pointed to the letter C on the card, and spoke the word, "car" as well as signed it. I told her that was correct and prompted her, "car starts with letter ___?" She responded with the letter C correctly.

Summary

To look at Abby's progress from the five sessions, it is clear to me that she made quite an improvement with her letter identification skills of A,B and C. She related well to the game, which related to her known world and thus, was engaged throughout all five sessions.

Rachel

Rachel's current IEP for this year, includes a written IEP goal stating that she "must listen to a story and identify the main character in the story or main idea of the story to display active listening skills and comprehension of text." We have been working on this goal all year; however, Rachel has shown to be extremely inconsistent with her responses. Rachel has a short attention span and so, the story or text needs to be of a shortened length. She tends to gravitate towards choosing the object or picture that she prefers rather than what is being asked of her. She also needs to be questioned in a simple and clear manner.

I began my first activity of play with Rachel on 2/6/12. Throughout the week, I worked with Rachel to attempt to reach this goal. For this activity, I decided to incorporate her goal with puppet play. I read or made up a story with the use of puppets to engage Rachel's interests and see if this would help her in identifying the main character of a story or the main idea. As I have had Rachel in my classroom all year, I have noticed that she responds well to theatrical performances; for example, our classroom had the Rochester Story Lady come into to perform, and I observed Rachel light right up and her participation was fully engaged. This made me decide to go this route for this task with Rachel.

The story that we would be reading for the week was *There was an old lady...* in which the old lady swallows miscellaneous animals and objects throughout the story. I wanted to first assess Rachel to see if she could correctly pick out the main character out of a field of two puppets, and if she successfully completed this task, then I would assess her ability to define the main idea of the story through a field of two pictures.

Session One: 2.6.12

For this first session with Rachel, I decided to sit her in the side room of our classroom to limit and avoid any sort of distractions that could influence her progress. I brought Rachel into the side room, sat her down and showed her the puppet props that I had for the session. I found a puppet kit for the story *There was an old lady...* in which Rachel could actively participate with the story and the puppets by me reading her the story and she actively listen to the text read and visually attend to the puppets representing the segments of the text. I showed Rachel the puppets individually, having her touch and visually attend to each one. I verbally walked her through what we would be doing for the session; I would be reading the story, acting out the story with the puppets, she would be watching and attending to the motions, and afterwards, would need to tell me who the main character of the story was based on the production. Rachel appeared to be quite attentive to the task, smiling and showing me her full attention. I perceived this as a step in the right direction for Rachel as she has a history of being non-complaint during structured work tasks and will show this behavior through putting her head down, not visually attending to staff and/or tasks, yelling/screaming during directions/tasks, and moving around in her chair.

I began reading and acting out the story to Rachel, my chair positioned facing her chair. She appeared to be visually attentive to the story as it played out. She looked, smiled, laughed and reached out to touch the puppets as I went through the story. She was able to interact with the puppets as the diverse animal puppets went into the old woman puppet's mouth. She was able to grasp most of the puppets with her hand and put them in as directed, which can be difficult for Rachel with her disability and constant ringing of her hands (self stimulatory behavior).

When I had finished the story, I reminded Rachel that she was still expected to find the main character of the story. I help up the puppet of the old woman and the puppet of the fly.

She looked at both of the puppets and then looked at me. This is a common occurrence for Rachel as she frequently needs reminders to make a choice by touching with her hands when given a field of two choice objects. She tends to get over stimulated by looking at a staff's face for a period of time if they grant her eye contact in return. When working with Rachel, my colleagues and I recognized that it is important to not give her eye contact that she wants in order for her to sustain focus on the task. It took Rachel approximately one minute to visually attend to the two puppet choices, she required one verbal prompt to make a choice by touching, and required me to ask the question, "Rachel, who was the main character in the story?" to be asked three times. Rachel ended up choosing the correct character by touching the old woman puppet on her first choice making attempt.

Session Two: 2.7.12

I felt that the previous session went so well with completing the task in the side room for less distraction that I decided to set up this second session the same way for Rachel. I brought her into the side room and reviewed the expectations once again with her. We would be doing the same book for this session, as I wanted to see if Rachel would show the same engagement with the presentation and would do just as well as she had done the day prior. After I went through the step by step directions and expectations for Rachel, we began the puppet show of the story. Rachel again appeared to be engaged with the display just as she had done the day before. She visually attended throughout the puppet show again, as well as tried to reach out to personally interact with the puppets as the show was going on. I had her interact with each puppet as well by placing them into the old woman puppet. When the puppet show was over and the old woman puppet had eaten all of the other puppets, I turned to Rachel and directed her that

she would need to make a choice to find who the story was about, holding out the old woman puppet and a spider puppet . Rachel took approximately 40 seconds to visually attend to both puppet props in front of her. She looked at both props and then looked at me. I prompted her again to make a choice by touching one of the puppets in front of her. She looked at both of the puppets and chose the spider on the first attempt. I corrected her response by taking away the spider out of her view and showing her the old woman puppet. I began reviewing the sequence of some of the story events by modeling for her how the old woman puppet was present the most in the story line.

After assessing Rachel's performance, I contemplated if she required a different approach to the task to help her succeed with the character identification.

Session Three: 2.8.12

For this session, I decided to take a different approach with Rachel. I looked at her progress and even though she succeeded on the task during the primary session, she failed the expectation on the second session. It made me wonder if the choice of two puppets within the story were too familiar or similar for what I was asking and therefore, confusing her on what I was asking her to do. She also could have been displaying her usual tendencies of choosing the option of what she desired rather than what was being asked. I decided to switch things up for this task and offer her two choices: one puppet related to the story that would be familiar and one other object that had no relation to the story.

We began this task just as the previous sessions. She actively listened and engaged with the tasks just as before in prior sessions. When it was time to make a choice, I asked her, "Rachel, who was the main character in the story?" as I showed her the old woman puppet and a

stuffed animal of a bunny, which she had never been in contact with before. Rachel took approximately thirty seconds to visually attend to both objects in front of her. She looked at me and I prompted her again with the same question followed up by directing her to touch one. She looked at the old woman puppet and chose it correctly. I praised her enthusiastically with her job well done. She appeared to respond better when given two different objects rather than two objects that were both represented in the story.

Session Four: 2.9.12

For this session, I decided to remain the same with how I went about doing things in order for Rachel to be successful with the task. I also decided to introduce the main idea portion of the task at this point. We revisited the expectations of the session. I read and acted out the story and this time, Rachel did not seem to respond quite as well to the props and story line. She showed some disinterest in the task by looking away and required multiple prompts to visually attend to the task. Once reengaged with the task after waiting her out, she complied with placing the puppets into the old woman puppets mouth and became more engaged with the session.

Once it was time for her choose the main character, I held up the old woman puppet and a different toy this time. I decided to add in a different type of toy that I knew might strike her interest to see if she would decipher between what she wanted to pick and what I was asking her to pick. I prompted her, "Rachel, who was the main character in the story?" She looked at both objects in my hand for approximately ten seconds before raising her hands for both objects simultaneously. I replaced her hands down in her lap and prompted her again, "Rachel, who was the main character in the story?" She visually attended to the objects again, first the woman puppet and then the toy. She reached up and chose the correct one, the old woman puppet. I was

very pleased with this as she resisted the preferred toy, which I thought she would gravitate towards.

I was very enthusiastic with my praises towards Rachel but I quickly transitioned to the next task so that I would not lose her attention and interest. I quickly verbally set Rachel up for the next task. I brought out the old woman puppet again and summarized the events of the story visually for her with the use of the puppets. As I went through the basic events of the story, I noticed that she was again losing interest with the task as she again needed prompts to visually attend to me, the speaker and the props.

Once she was attentive to the task, I set her up with the next task by telling her that now I wanted her to tell me which picture held up represented the story that she just listened to. I held up two 4 by 4 inch pictures that I had made on a software program that the school uses to create universal picture communication symbols that would be easy for Rachel to comprehend. I held up one picture that represented a picture of a shooting star, which obviously had no connection to the story we read about the old woman. In my other hand I held up a picture of the old woman from the story. She carefully looked over both pictures, and I asked her again, "Rachel, can you find the picture about the story?" It took Rachel approximately 20 seconds to look over and process both pictures before making her choice; she chose the picture of the star. I quickly corrected her and reminded her that the picture related to the story was the picture of the old woman and showed her the correlation between the picture and the puppet. I showed the two side by side and had her look at and touch each one. This task was still new to her so it may have taken some time for her to get accustomed to and comfortable with.

Session Five: 2.10.12

This would be Rachel's last session with these tasks. We began in our side room away from distractions as usual. I jumped right into the task with a brief overview of what we would be doing today. I reminded Rachel that we would be reading our story of the old woman again and that she would be expected to tell me afterwards what character was in the story. I began to read the story with the puppets; she appeared once again to be engaged with the task. This time I asked her if she wanted to help me with the old woman puppet, and she seemed to be excited. I placed the woman puppet on her hand, knowing that with the ringing of her hands, this would not last long and we would have to work fast because the puppet would fall off with the movement of her fingers. She held the puppet for the first few puppet animals to go in, when the woman puppet fell off, I replaced it back on her hand. She seemed really happy with participating in this way as she laughed and was fully attentive to the task.

Once we finished the story, I reminded her that she needed to show me who was in the story. I held up the old woman puppet and small, plastic figurine of an elephant. She immediately gravitated her eyes towards the woman puppet and grabbed it. I enthusiastically praised her efforts and moved on to the main idea. "Rachel, what was the story about?" As I held up the old woman picture again with the star picture. She picked the picture with the star again. I quickly corrected her and reminded her that the picture should relate to the story was the picture of the old woman and showed her the correlation between the picture and the puppet. I showed the two side by side and had her look at and touch each one to help her make the connection.

Rachel chose the correct puppet in relation to the main character of the story four out of five opportunities, which indicates to me that she made gains in the area of character

identification. She was unsuccessful for choosing the main topic of the story as she chose incorrectly both times when asked.

For the next set of sessions, I decided to incorporate kinesthetic movement into story lines for Rachel. When we have done interactive read alouds, I have observed that Rachel is more engaged with text when she can be actively involved with it. She also enjoys exercising and participating in creative movement activities, which we do daily, so I thought by combining the two and making a read aloud active and engaging by moving, would become a playful way to engage and grasp her attention and thus, assist her in being able to choose characters and/or main ideas from the story.

Session One: 2.27.12

For this first session, I decided that I would introduce a new book to Rachel. I chose the book called *Let it Snow* by Maryann Cocca-Leffler (2010), which is a short story with 1-2 brief sentences on each page and little dialogue. The story takes place in the winter season and is about what kids do to play in the wintertime. I gave Rachel a short book introduction about the book in which she could just look at the pictures and get a feel for the story. I explained to her that I would need her help as I read the story to act the story. She looked engaged with the activity as I had her full attention and she smiled. On each page, I had placed a tiny post-it note to remind myself of the action that we would do, that way I knew I could be consistent with the book throughout the entire week's sessions and avoid confusion. I turned to the first page and read the words, "Let it snow! It's winter!" as I signed the sign for snow (a familiar sign for Rachel). I prompted Rachel to do the signal with me as I prompted her at her elbows and lifted up her arms. She attempted to sign the same with me. "Great job, Rachel!" I praised her

excitedly. I felt that her engagement was just right at that point so I wanted to keep on going with it while I had her attention. I turned to the second page and read, "Swirling, whirling, first snowflakes, Skating, spinning, on frozen lakes!" While reading these lines I made swirling motions with my arms in the air and prompted Rachel to do the same. I held her arms up at the elbows again and helped her make the swirling motions with her arms. She laughed at our silliness and we continued. On the next pages I read, "Lacy trees, hills of white, sledding snowmen, snowball fight" as we acted out having a snowball fight, I held her arm at the elbow to make the pretend action of throwing a snowball. We continued as I turned the page and read, "But then...rosy cheeks, runny nose, cold, wet mittens and frozen toes" all of these areas I pointed to on my body, then had her assist with touching her own cheeks, nose, hands and toes. "Let it snow! Sweet hot chocolate, glowing light, cozy blankets, and snuggle tight." For these two pages, I pretended I had a blanket on and snuggled my arms to my chest. Then had her do the same with hand over hand assistance.

The book still had thirteen pages left but I decided to keep the reading short in terms of her attention span and abilities. After reading this much of the story, I offered Rachel a brief overview of the book verbally and simply put, while showing her the cover of the book once again. After doing this, I took out two large, four inch by four inch pictures, one represented the main character (the little girl's picture from the story wearing her pink winter hat and scarf) and a picture not affiliated with the text which was a picture of another known character, Clifford the big red dog. I held up both pictures in front of Rachel, and she took approximately 10 seconds to look at both pictures. After I was certain that she recognized both pictures, I asked her, "Rachel, we just read a story about what we do in the wintertime and snow. Who was in this story?" She took another fifteen seconds to look at both pictures in front of her and then looked at me. I

looked away from her to avoid eye contact and asked her again, “Rachel, we just read a story about what we do in the wintertime and snow. Who was in this story? Can you touch their picture?” Her eye gaze returned to the pictures as she blatantly looked at the picture of the girl, reached up and touched it. I quickly praised her good efforts and she looked very pleased with her progress.

I wanted to quickly move onto the next prompts and took out my next series of pictures asking, “Rachel, can you find the picture of what the story was about?” I held up the two pictures, one representing a picture of snow, the other a picture of a beach scene with sand and a smiling sunshine. She glared at the two pictures for about five seconds, lifted her hand and chose the picture of the snow. I was again, quick to praise her for her great work on these tasks, and followed up with some candy spray for positive reinforcement, something she is very interested in. Before giving her the candy reinforcement, I went through the rules that she followed for the task with her, telling her how proud I was of her actions and attention during the activity.

Session Two: 2.28.12

My set up of this session mirrored the previous session, in terms of how the activity was set up, giving her a basic book introduction, reading the book, kinesthetically acting out of the book led by the post-it descriptions on each page, and then reminding her of the expectations to come. For character identification, I held up the same two pictures as I previously had done the picture of the main character (girl) and Clifford. She looked at both pictures and chose correctly again. I was quick to reinforce her with positive praise but less than yesterday. I asked her to now choose the picture that represented the story and she chose the snow picture correctly again.

Because Rachel was engaged with the text so much through her movement, I believe that this helped her with her accuracy of answering these questions, and because the time it has taken her to listen, look and process what was being asked of her decreased so much at this time, it made me think that I needed to reevaluate my technique and offer her more of a challenge, which was an extremely positive thing.

Session Three: 2.29.12

For this session, I went about the book introduction and movement as I had done the two sessions prior. I observed that Rachel appeared to be just as engaged with the text and the kinesthetic movement as she had been in the other two sessions. To assess Rachel's progress for this task, I wanted to bring in more of a challenge for her. I decided to offer her three choices rather than the two that she was familiar with because she was doing so well with this task. When it was time for Rachel to identify the main character of the story, I took out a board with three inch by three inch pictures on it and asked, "Rachel, we just read a story about what we do in the wintertime and snow. Who was in this story? Can you touch their picture?" The pictures were decreased in size, the picture of the girl from the story was the same except smaller, and there were two different pictures on the strip as well; one picture was a picture of a cat, the other picture was of boy, unrelated to the story. Rachel visually attended to all three pictures for approximately twenty seconds, and then looked at me. I cued her again with the question and her eyes returned to the strip. Her hand went up and touched the picture of the boy. I was quick to correct her action and reviewed the story with her, showing her the main character in the book to remind her. I held up the picture of the girl from the strip board and placed it next to the same

picture of the girl in the book to help her with the correlation. I wasn't sure if she chose the picture of the boy because it was just new to her or just what she was interested in at the time.

I moved on to the main topic question, as I had done the same revisions to this task as the main character task. I decreased the size of the pictures to three inches by three inches and also added in two new pictures with the same picture of the snow. The new pictures were of a child walking into school and a picture of people on an airplane. After the previous task, I wanted to maintain her attention and engagement so I jumped right into the next task by asking her, "Rachel, can you find the picture of what the story was about?" She looked at the three pictures for approximately fifteen seconds; specifically her eyes appeared to fixate on the picture of the child going into the school. She looked at me afterwards and I asked her again. Rachel did not respond with any hand movement or gesture at this point so I prompted her at the elbow with no eye contact. She revisited the picture strip in front of her and chose the picture of the snow. I praised her for her great efforts and offered her candy reinforcement for completing this task, reminding her that she needed to remember to follow the rules when I ask her to do so, after seeing her brief act of non-compliance for this task.

Session Four: 3.1.12

For this session, I decided based on Rachel's performance in our last session that I would continue with the assessment of three pictures per task. I began with the book introduction as usual, followed by reading the book with all of the motions of the story. Rachel appeared engaged with the text as usual. After we had finished the story, I went back and reminded her of the expectations, just as we had always done in every session. I held up the three picture strip and went through the pictures with Rachel, helping her point and making sure she was visually attending to each picture as I stated/identified them and she pointed with my hand on her hand.

After going through the pictures, I asked, "Rachel, we just read a story about what we do in the wintertime and snow. Who was in this story? Can you touch their picture?" She looked at the three pictures for approximately ten seconds and what almost seemed like an impulsive action, picked her hand up without me asking a second time and chose the correct picture of the little girl character. I enthusiastically praised her and moved on to the next task. "Great job Rachel! Now let's look at these three pictures" I said as I switched the boards. I picked up her hand and had her point to the three pictures of the snow, airplane and school. I asked her, "Can you find the picture of what the story was about?" She looked at the three pictures for approximately ten seconds, picked her hand up and touched the picture of the snow. I praised her for her hard work for this task and offered her a choice of reinforcement for following the rules and directions.

Session Five: 3.2.12

For our last session regarding this task, I decided to attempt to relinquish some control to Rachel for her actions to see if she would involve herself with the task more independently, with less prompting and support from me. I offered her a book introduction as usual, and began to read. Instead of giving her touch prompts and modeling to support her actions throughout the story, I waited to see if she would do them more independently. As I began reading the story, I waited Rachel out to see if she would initiate the actions that we had been practicing all week. She smiled at me and looked at my face, as she did not independently carry these actions out without prompting and/or assistance from me; she was expecting my support through this. I began to help her by offering limited touch control prompting but faded that support out as we went on. Some of the pages she would carry out the actions if I modeled them for her, so she would know how to do it.

After completing the story, I began the assessment part with the three pictures for each task. I verbally went through each picture with her identifying what they were. I took out the first picture strip and asked her, "Rachel, we just read a story about what we do in the wintertime and snow. Who was in this story? Can you touch their picture?" She looked at the pictures for approximately fifteen seconds, and then made her choice by placing her hand on the picture of the girl. I was very pleased with her response and praised her. I moved right into the assessment for the topic of the story the same way as the character identification; showing her the pictures and identifying them for her. Then I prompted her, "Can you find the picture of what the story was about?" She looked at the three pictures and put her hand on the picture of the school this time. I am not sure why she touched this picture, as she had gotten this correct so many times before. It is quite possible that she gravitated towards this picture because it was the picture she was interested in at the time.

From the very beginning of this task, Rachel did very well with her responses; she did so well that she required more of a challenge half way through the week. Even when challenged with this task, Rachel proved to excel with the demand of finding the character and the main idea of the story. I was pleasantly surprised with her improvement in this area as she has struggled with her accuracy all year. She remains to be inconsistent with her responses at times as she proved in the last session when she chose incorrectly for the main idea of the story, when she had chosen the correct response numerous times before. Her overall behavior displayed that she remained engaged with the task throughout the week and responded well to the kinesthetic approach.

Summary

Overall, Rachel's performance was very surprising in a positive way. Throughout this school year, getting Rachel to be productive and engaged with her literacy tasks has been extremely difficult on the classroom staff. Rachel tries to defy and escape structured work tasks on a daily basis as she does not enjoy demand activities. Although Rachel did not get every task correct and every answer accurate, she made a significant increase in her productivity with working on this goal. She also made a huge improvement in her work ethic as she remained engaged throughout all tasks as directed with little or no non-compliance. All of this proves that Rachel is a student who greatly benefitted from play being incorporated into her literacy development work tasks.

Sam

Sam is a nonverbal student who has Cerebral Palsy and is non-ambulatory in a wheelchair. He verbalizes through the use of his DynoVox communication system linked with an EyeMax system, which is a computerized system that calibrates with Sam's pupils. He can push buttons literally with his eyes on the device. Although Sam cannot physically manage his body, he displays much awareness in his cognitive abilities and enjoys watching others around him (peers and teachers) and interacting with preferred staff. Sam has many current IEP goals in which he uses his device. He currently is working on literacy goals, specifically letter identification of letters A, B, C; D and E (are specifically written into the goal).

Sam has been extremely inconsistent with meeting the criteria of this goal over the course of the school year, as many diverse tactics have been tried to assist him in meeting this goal's expectations. He often displays a high level of non-compliance when completing his work goals

on his communication device and has been put on a formal behavior plan, which is monitored by the school's behavior therapist. When Sam is non-compliant, he will not activate his device and look around the room deliberately not looking at the DynoVox. If he is non-compliant for more than fifteen minutes at a time, the behavior therapist is called and will sometimes intervene, however sometimes the therapist will not intervene in order to not provide Sam further attention, which is what he longs for. He often will press the incorrect button to gain attention from staff as well when showing non-compliance. We have tried games in the past such as candy land to work on his color identification skills during work time to try to avoid these behaviors. He is usually engaged with the game at first however, he has a history of losing interest after a few sessions.

For Sam's first week of sessions, I decided to do something similar to Abby's session, which was to make a game board related to Sam's home life. Sam is highly motivated by his family and on his DynoVox's home page his family has uploaded many pictures of his immediate and extended family members. He will often go to pages such as these when he is being asked to do demand activities, so these preferred pages need to be "hidden" so that he cannot enter them at the time of demands and focus on what he is being asked to do.

I created a game in which Sam had to race another player to get to his dad's cottage (which Sam goes to frequently) which has a picture of his dad's boat. Much like Abby's game board, his family was eager to assist by providing family pictures that Sam would recognize. Sam's game board was similar to Abby in the way the game was played as well: the letters on the board A-E with matching A-E letter cards. The cards had different tasks such as identify the letter, picture/letter cards and wild cards, which had directions such as, "mom said go to bed, move back three spaces!" or, "Grandpa Bill wants to play football with you, move ahead two

spaces!” All of the wild cards had names of family members on them which I thought would Sam would motivate engage him. Because of Sam’s limited physical abilities, I would do all the physical work such as picking cards for both of us, and moving the game piece. Sam would use his device once a card was selected that he had to identify the letter, look at the letter on the card, and find the same letter on the page on his device. Sam has a letter page on his device which has the letter A-E.

Session One: 3.5.12

Prior to playing the game, I started off by assessing what Sam knew already about the letters A-E. I held up large representations/cues of the letters and asked him to find the correlating letters on his device out of a field of the five letters. He was able to successfully find the letter A on his first attempt, however he required much prompting and multiple attempts to find the correlating letters B, C, D, and E.

During the first session, I spent an extensive period of time setting Sam up with a firm understanding of what we would be doing for the week in terms of our sessions. I showed him the game and at first, I think based on the expression on his face that he was confused. Once I showed him the family parts of the game, he started to smile as he usually does when he talks to about his family and home life. I knew with a game like this, I would be doing the physical work as Sam would be expected to use his communication skills to work on identifying letters.

Once I felt that Sam understood the game, I asked him what color game piece he would like to be, as I directed him towards the color page on his device. He chose the color green, I chose my game piece and we were ready to play. As we began to play, Sam appeared to be engaged with the game; he was smiling and laughing especially when he landed on spaces that

involved his family or when he selected cards with familiar names on them. During the game, Sam landed on a total of four letter A spaces for this game, five letter B spaces, four letter C spaces, three letter D spaces and six letter E spaces. Out of the four letter A cards, he picked two letter A identification cards and two picture/letter cards. For all four cards however, I asked Sam to identify what letter was on the card using his device. Sam responded correctly on the first try 1:4 times. Out of the five letter B cards he pulled, he had to identify the letter B five times as well, but did so correctly on the first attempt 0:5 times. Out of the four letter C cards, he had to identify the letter C two times as the remaining three cards were wild. Out of the two letter C identification cards, Sam correctly identified the letter 1:2 times. Out of the three D cards, he was asked to identify the letter D twice (one wild card) and responded correctly 0:2 times. Out of the six letter E cards, Sam was asked to identify the letter for four out of six cards (two wild); Sam responded correctly on the first attempt 2:4 attempts. Sam did appear to be engaged with the game during the entire session and he did not display any signs of non-compliance.

Session Two: 3.6.12

For this session, I offered Sam an extensive review of the game that we had played the day prior, just as I had done in the first session. He appeared to be engaged with the game as he responded with smiles and laughs. He visually attended to me as I reviewed the rules and expectations of the game and we went through our color choices.

As we played the game, Sam landed on a total of six letter A spaces, three letter B spaces, three letter C spaces, five letter D spaces and four letter E spaces. Out of the six letter A spaces, he pulled four letter A identification cards and two picture/letter cards. Out of these six cards, he was asked to identify/match the letter A on the cards to the letter A on his communication

device; he was able to correctly do this on the first attempt one time and required many prompts for the remaining five cards. Out of the three letter B cards pulled, he pulled three letter identification cards in which he correctly identified the letter B two out of the three cards on his first attempt; the other card he required many prompts. Out of the three letter C cards he pulled, Sam was asked to identify the letter C two times out of the three, the third card being a wild card moving him back three spaces. He was not able to correctly identify any of the three letter C cards on his first attempt and required multiple prompts for each. Out of the five letter D cards pulled, Sam pulled three letter identification cards, one wild card and one picture/letter card in which he was still asked to identify the letter. Out of the four letters he was asked to identify with the use of his device, he did not correctly identify any of the letters on the first attempt and required multiple prompts to find the correct letter match. Out of the four letter E cards he pulled, two were wild cards and two were letter identification cards; Sam required many prompts on the first identification card pulled, however correctly identified the second card on his first attempt.

Session Three: 3.7.12

I began the session the same way as the others, offering Sam accurate expectations for the game. Based on Sam's performance in our previous session, I decided to alter some things with this session. Sam struggled with finding many of the letters asked of him on his first attempts in our last session and required much prompting to get through the letter identification cards. I questioned if the struggle was due to him choose out of a field of five letters; perhaps that was too much for him. . I modified his device so that he would only be offered a field of three letters at a time to see if that would be helpful. Before beginning the game, I reviewed the

new set up of his device, walking him through the new appearing pages so that he could become familiar with them before beginning.

During the game, Sam landed on a total of four letter A spaces, five letter B spaces, six letter C spaces, three letter D spaces and four letter E spaces. Out of the four letter A spaces, Sam was asked to identify the letter A all four times. He responded correctly (given the field of two letters on his device) two out of the four times. Out of the five letter B cards pulled, he was asked to identify the letter B two times out of the five (three cards being wild cards). He correctly identified the letter B on his first attempt twice out of the two times, which was a big accomplishment for him. Out of the letter six C cards he pulled, he was asked to identify the letter C four times, with two cards being wild. He was successful at finding the letter on his device three out of the four times, as he needed many prompting for the first letter C pulled (given a field of two letters to choose from). Out of the three letter D cards pulled, he was asked to find the letter D two out of the three times, one card being a wild card. He successfully found the letter D on his first attempt one out of the two times, as he required many prompts on his first try. Out of the four letter E cards pulled, he was asked to identify the letter E three out of the four times, one card being a wild card. He was successful on his first attempt finding the letter zero times out of the three times, as he showed signs of non-compliance for this task and needed many verbal prompts and reminders to stay on task. He also hit the distracter letter many times when cued to find the letter E.

Session Four: 3.8.12

I based this session on giving Sam the field of two letters to choose from, because in our previous session, Sam's increased his ability to identify and match letters with fewer choices. I

offered Sam a brief introduction of the game expectations once again, and we began to play. Sam landed on six letter A spaces, three letter B spaces, four letter C spaces, four letter D spaces and five letter E spaces. Out of the six letter A cards he pulled, Sam was requested to identify the letter A four times with two cards being wild. He was able to correctly identify the letter on the first attempt four times out of four times, a significant display of progress in this area for Sam. Out of the three letter B cards, he was asked to identify the letter two out of three times, one card being a wild card. He was able to correctly identify the letter one out of the two times, the first attempt needing many prompts. Out of the four letter C cards pulled, Sam was asked to identify the letter three out of four times, one card being wild. He accurately identified the letter one time out of the three times, as the first two attempts required much prompting and he showed some non-compliant behavior. Out of the four letter D cards pulled, he was asked to identify the letter two out of four times, with two cards being wild. He accurately identified the letter one out of the two times, the first attempt requiring many prompts. Out of the five letter E cards Sam pulled, he was asked to identify the letter three times, two cards being wild. He accurately identified the letter one time out of three times, however this still showed improvement from the previous session.

Session Five: 3.9.12

I set up our last session much like the previous two sessions, giving Sam a field of two letters in hopes that he was comfortable at this point with this set up and familiar with the task at hand. I also hoped that Sam's non-compliant behavior would not settle in even more so that I could really track his progress accurately.

During this session, Sam landed on a total of three letter A spaces, five letter B spaces, six letter C spaces, three letter D spaces and five letter E spaces. Out of the three cards pulled for letter A, he was asked to identify the letter all three times and was successful on his first attempt one time out of the three. The first two attempts he required many prompts. Out of the five letter B cards, he was asked to identify the letter three times with two cards being wild. He accurately identified the letter two times out of the three, with the first card requiring many prompts. Out of the six letter C cards pulled, Sam was asked to identify the letter four times with two cards being wild. He was able to successfully identify two of these cards correctly on his first attempt, with the two first cards requiring many prompts to do so. Out of the three letter D cards, he was asked to identify the letter for all three cards drawn. He was able to do so correctly one time out of the three, the first two attempts required many prompts. On the five letter E cards, Sam was asked to identify the letter four out of the five cards, one card being wild. He was able to successfully identify the letter E on his first attempt two out of the four times as he needed many prompts for the first two attempts.

To assess this thinking further as we finished up our final session, I decided to go one step further to give him one last try at identifying or finding the same letter on his device. I held up larger cues of each letter to see if he could find the correlating letter on his device, given a field of all five letters. He was able to do so on his first attempt for letters A, B, and D and found letters C and E given two attempts.

For Sam's second week of sessions, I also decided that because his known world is such a motivator for him to learn with, that I would also connect his known world with this activity for the week. As I have mentioned previously, Sam's family is extremely involved and take Sam on many vacations and adventures. When Sam is at home, rarely is he ever confined to his

wheelchair but he is taken everywhere in a stroller that is less restrictive for him. Sam's family lives their lives attempting to make Sam's life as, "typical" as possible, taking him tubing behind their speedboat in the summer, camping and even fishing with his dad, a favorite pastime of Sam's.

For this activity, I decided to make a fishing game. I recognized that because of Sam's low muscle tone that he would need much support for carrying out the physical demands of this activity; however, he would be able to enjoy it and learn at the same time. For the fishing game, I made a pond out of blue butcher paper to represent Sam's usual lake or pond. I already had a fishing pole with a magnet on the end from previous activities that I had done in my classroom. I made alphabet fish cards A-E and attached paperclips that would connect to the magnetic fishing pole to place on the blue paper. I made a total of ten of each card.

The expectation of the game was that Sam and I would take turns fishing out letters and Sam would identify the letters. I also included some fun activity cards to maintain Sam's interest in game; Sam has a common behavior that Sam of shutting down and showing signs of non-compliance. These cards included directions such as, "move in a circle five times" if he drew this card I would wheel him around the room real fast, something Sam enjoys. I planned to keep a tally and notes throughout our game to keep track of Sam's progress.

Session One: 3.12.12

For this first session, I gave Sam a thorough idea of what we would be doing, even modeling the actions for him. He had a smile on his face the whole time I was introducing the game to him, which I took as a good sign that he was engaged with the task.

We played the fishing game for the half hour block that Sam's peers attended APE (adapted physical education), so he had a work area free from distractions to adjust to the expectations. During this session, Sam and I fished out a combined total of four letter A cards, five letter B cards, five letter C cards, four letter D cards, six letter E cards and five activity cards. When each letter card was "caught," I asked Sam to find the correlating letter on his communication device. He was able to do so on the first attempt for 2:4 letter A cards, 2:5 letter B cards, 2:5 of the letter C cards, 1:4 of the letter D cards and 3:6 of the letter E cards. Sam remained engaged with the tasks for the entire game and really seemed to enjoy the activity cards offsetting the letter identification cards to break up the demands placed on him. He practiced finding the letters asked out of a field of two letters.

Session Two: 3.13.12

For this session, I again gave Sam a solid foundation of what we would be doing for the day. I reviewed the game expectations, and we began to play. For this game, Sam and I fished out a total of seven letter A cards, five letter B cards, six letter C cards, five letter D cards, four letter E cards, and six activity cards. Out of the seven letter A cards, Sam was able to correctly identify the letter on his communication device (on his first attempt) three times out of the seven. For the five letter B cards, Sam was able to correctly identify three out of the five letter B card on his first attempt. For the six letter C cards, Sam was able to correctly identify the letter C three out of the six attempts on his first try. For the five letter D cards, Sam was able to identify the letter two times out of the five on his first attempt. For the four letter E cards, Sam correctly identified the letter one time out of the four on his first attempt.

I liked the progress Sam was making with this task. At this point, he was showing progress with the matching and identification of the letters being asked of him. He remained to be given a field of two letters to choose from in order to remain consistent and successful with the task and at the same time, not feel overwhelmed with the expectations. He appeared to be engaged with the overall task given to him, and felt a sense of fun rather than demands being placed on him.

Session Three: 3.14.12

For this session, we continued to practice our literacy learning consistent with the previous sessions. I again explained the game to Sam, although he already had firm background knowledge of what to expect. Sam and I began playing, and he appeared to be interested in the game once again. Out of all of our turns combined, we pulled a total of all ten letter A cards, seven letter B cards, five letter C cards, six letter D cards, and five letter E cards. Sam pulled a total of four activity cards. Out of the ten letter A cards, Sam was able to correctly identify six out of the ten cards on his first attempt. Out of the seven letter B cards, Sam was able to correctly identify four out of the seven cards on his first attempt. Out of the five letter C cards, Sam was able to correctly identify four out of five of the cards on his first attempt. Out of the six letter D cards, Sam was able to correctly identify four cards on his first attempt. Out of the five letter E cards, Sam was able to correctly identify the letter E two times on his first attempt.

Session Four: 3.15.12

This session was very much consistent to the other three previous sessions, I set Sam up with success and provided him with expectations for the session. During this session, Sam and I

pulled a total of six letter A cards, eight letter B cards, three letter C cards, two letter D cards, six letter E cards and pulled five activity cards. Out of the six letter A cards, Sam was able to identify four letters on his first try correctly. Out of the eight letter B cards, he successfully identified five of the cards on his first attempt. Out of the three letter C cards, he successfully identified two out of the three cards on his first attempt. Out of the two letter D cards, he successfully identified both cards correctly on his first attempt. Out of the six letter E cards, he was able to correctly identify two of the cards accurately on the first attempt.

Session Five: 3.16.12

During this session, Sam and I pulled a total of five letter A cards, four letter B cards, eight letter C cards, six letter D cards, two letter E cards and four activity cards. Out of the five letter A cards, Sam correctly identified the letter four out of the five times on his first try. Out of the four letter B cards, Sam correctly identified the letter two out of the four times on his first attempt. Out of the eight letter C cards, Sam correctly identified the letter five out of the eight times on his first attempt. Out of the six letter D cards, Sam correctly identified the letter D three out of the six times on his first attempt. Out of the two letter E cards, he was able to correctly identify the letter once out of the two times on his first attempt.

I wanted to complete a final assessment of this task, so after the game was completed, I held up larger letter cues of A-E capital letters. Sam responded correctly by finding the same letter on his communication device on his first try for letters A, B, and C but needed two attempts at letters D and E.

Summary

In all, Sam displayed great progress throughout this task over the course of the week. He showed that he decreased in the level of prompting from me and actually remained engaged with the task each time it was introduced to him. Usually during demand work tasks is when Sam displays his highest levels of non-compliant behavior, and over the course of this week, he showed no signs of non-compliance which means he was engaged with the task and his scored proved that he was retaining knowledge at the same time.

Results of Teacher Interviews

For the interview process, I interviewed teachers within the specialized school in order to understand some of their different outlooks on literacy, literacy instruction and play development. Because this school does not have different grade levels as would be present in a typical or district setting school, the students are grouped based on cognitive ability and age (students need to be within 36 months in age within the classroom setting). The six teachers interviewed work with a range of students of various ages and disabilities and have diverse demographics:

- **Preschool Teacher #1:** Preschool setting, works with students of ages three to five years old of diverse cognitive abilities and an array of disabilities. Teacher has been employed at this school for 26 years, in the preschool program. Teacher has a Master's Degree in Special Education grades K-12.

- **Preschool Teacher #2:** Preschool setting, works with students of ages three to five years old of diverse cognitive abilities and an array of disabilities. Teacher has been employed at this school for 14 years, exclusively in the preschool program. She has had experiences with full day preschool and half day preschool programs at this school. Has Master's Degree in Special Education, Certification in General and Special Education, as well as a degree in Speech Therapy.
- **School Age Teacher #1:** School Age teacher, works with students ages 4-7. Has worked previously in special education day care/educational setting prior to coming to work at this school. Has worked at this school for two years. Has Master's Degree in Literacy and certification in General Education and Special Education.
- **School Age Teacher #2:** School Age teacher of students of ages 5-8. She has worked in this school setting for four years; she began working at this school at the Secondary Campus and has been at the elementary campus for the last two years. Teacher is certified in special education and has a Master's Degree in Special Education.
- **School Age Teacher #3:** School Age teacher currently of students ages 8-11. Teacher has been in the school-age program on this campus for three years. Teacher has Master's Degree in Literacy and is certified in General and Special Education.
- **School Age Teacher #4:** School Age teacher for students 12-15; teacher has worked in this setting for eight years on the elementary campus. Teacher is certified in general and special education K-12 and has a Master's Degree in Special Education.

All of the teachers interviewed work with students with a diverse array of disabilities.

What does your classroom look like in terms of disabilities? How are you supporting your students in terms of literacy support?

The teachers responded to this question based on the students with disabilities in their classrooms. The preschool teachers defined their classroom as students with high behavior needs, disabilities such as severe ADHD, Autism, Multiple Disabilities, and Downs Syndrome. The school age teachers described their students with an array of disabilities: Cerebral Palsy, Autism, significant behavior needs and cognitive delays, multiply disabled, and Spina Bifida Syndrome.

All six teachers said that they use labels in their classroom to support their students' literacy development. All six teachers noted that they support their students by using some kind of literacy activities in their daily plans. More specifically, School Age Teachers #2 and #4 and Preschool Teacher #1 mentioned their use of magnetic letters on a cookie sheet for a literacy center activity. School Age Teacher #2 mentioned coloring letter identification pages out of a coloring book in her groups and center work. All four school age teachers mentioned incorporating letter of the week in their morning meeting routine in which the students practice identifying words that begin with that letter being analyzed for the duration of the week. School Age Teacher #2 mentioned the use of guided reading groups once daily in her classroom. She stated that the students are grouped based on their reading skills and behaviors and worked with during a thirty minute group, however not all students in her class have the abilities to participate in this yet. All six teachers mentioned the common theme and importance of using simple read alouds throughout the duration of their days. Preschool Teachers #1 and #2 mentioned that they use real alouds during their circle routines for their students to recognize the concepts about print and become more familiar with books, what to look for in text, how to think critically about text. School Age Teachers #1, #3 and #4 stated that they use read alouds in their

school day in relation to their educational group activities; school age teacher #1 specifically gave the example of if she was teaching that day about butterflies, she would begin that group activity using a non-fiction or fictional book in relation to butterflies to help the students relate to the activity following the read aloud.

How would you define literacy?

Each teacher offered her definition of literacy:

Preschool Teacher #1: “The ability to read and write.”

Preschool Teacher #2: “To be able to read, write and communicate.”

School Age Teacher #1: “To have the knowledge to read and write. To be able to relay messages to others through this knowledge.”

School Age Teacher #2: “Understanding the relation of words, letters and sounds. Being able to read and write.”

School Age Teacher #3: “Having the understanding and the knowledge and ability to read, write and communicate.”

School Age Teacher #4: “Being able to read and write and understanding the linking of words and significance of letters within those words.”

All six teachers defined literacy as having to do with reading and writing. Preschool Teacher #1 left her definition as just this, having just the basic knowledge of the definition of literacy. She did not to elaborate on her response in more detail when I asked her to do so during the interview. Preschool Teacher #2 mentioned the same response as Preschool Teacher #1 but added the word, “communicate” on the end which she most likely works on her students’ abilities to communicate with each other. Her response relates to the six components of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking and viewing. School Age Teacher #1 response

was similar to Preschool Teacher #2's response, but she elaborated on the communication portion of the description in a different way. These two teachers based have a very similar way of defining the term literacy. School Age Teacher #2 went a different route, first stating that to her, literacy meant, "Understanding the relation of words, letters and sounds" which I thought was interesting because she noted this before stating, "the ability to read and write." Her response indicates that she values the writing trait of literacy and recognized the importance of the connection of words, their break down, meaning and articulation. School Age Teacher #3's response also connected to Preschool Teacher #2's response as both of these teachers noted reading, writing and communication in their definitions. School Age Teacher #4 gave an interesting response of, "Being able to read and write and understanding the linking of words and significance of letters within those words." This is interesting because this teacher not only recognizes literacy as having the ability to read and write but elaborates on the importance of seeing the big picture of linking words together and being able to break down words and notice the significance single letters hold.

What does literacy instruction mean to you?

The preschool teachers noted the significance of letter learning and phonemic awareness. The two teachers offered insight into their specific teaching strategies and how to incorporate meaningful instruction to these students with such significant impairments. They said that a majority of the significant literacy learning takes place during structured play times, circle time songs and chants, and structured group activities.

Preschool Teacher #1: "Literacy instruction means to help my students read and write and get them ready for the next phase in their education: going to Kindergarten. Although for the

students that I have, it is rare that they will actually read words because of their low cognitive abilities, I can set them up for success by helping them learn letters and things about book in general, like how to hold the book the right way, looking at pictures, things like that. We practice lots of groups and circle activities that help them clap words and take words apart, just by listening. The aides and I in the classroom help students during our play times to practice writing, even if it means just scribbling on paper for things like making grocery lists during dramatic play or saying letters during imaginative play.”

Preschool Teacher #2: “Literacy instruction in my classroom consists of many things. My instruction consists of learning and practicing the alphabet and trying to incorporate print and practice of print in as many things throughout the short time they are here as I possibly can. This usually is in our structured group activities that we do at the table, like alphabet learning books that they look at and see different examples of objects and things that start with that letter we are learning, coloring pages, or crafts. During circle we sing songs which include clapping, snapping, and stomping for example to different beats, chants and words.”

The two Preschool Teachers both discussed and highlighted the importance of this age group to learn through phonetic awareness. Although they talked about it in different ways, both teachers mention the idea of clapping or chanting or doing some sort of movement with/for the students that relates to literacy learning. Both teachers discuss their use of time for structured group activities for their literacy instruction.

The School Age Teachers gave examples of morning meeting songs and activities such as the letter of the week, writing examples on a white board, read alouds, joke reading/telling, calendar work, and weather work. They mentioned the importance of structured group literacy activities such as constructing letter books based on the monthly theme, structured center

activities such as stamping letters, matching letters, sentence structuring activities, and practicing writing personal information to teach daily living skills.

School Age Teacher #1: “Literacy instruction means to help my students become as familiar as possible with reading and writing as I possibly can. My current students are very low functioning, so I try to make them familiar with the basic letters, however many cannot identify them verbally or accurately. My literacy instruction is specifically defined to my students and their abilities. Some of my students are working on recognizing print and the letters within the print, most of my students look at books for leisure but basically like the pictures. I incorporate letter work in my individualized work bins, structured group activities and morning meeting times. Morning meeting times are a big one because we do things like review the calendar months and days, the weather, songs, things like that and everything is boldly labeled for their viewing in front of them so that they are getting that text support along with pictures and symbols.”

School Age Teacher #2: “Literacy instruction is so important because you have to teach students how to identify letters, how to form words based on these letters, how to use these letters to form sentences, how to properly use language and sentence structure, kind of like a chain reaction. My classroom is unique because I have a double classroom, meaning, I personally have seven students of my own on my caseload, however I share a large room with another teacher who also has seven students. The way our instruction works is we are able to separate all fourteen students and group all of these students in groups appropriate for all instruction, which if I only had seven, it would be more difficult. We teach through guided reading, interactive read aloud activities, we teach all of our students how to look through texts and make inferences, predictions, pull out important details, basically teaching them important

strategies that they will carry with them as they go through our school or if they leave our school to go to a district setting eventually. We do partner book reviews and book reports and incorporate lots of movement and/or kinesthetic learning in relation to literacy and the kids really respond well to it.

School Age Teacher #3: “Literacy instruction, like our students, comes in many shapes and forms. My students are in wheelchairs and non-verbal and on different levels, so my literacy instruction is very simple. I expose them to books, basically through read alouds and show them pictures. I ask them questions however, many cannot answer. It’s hard to know with my group what they can and cannot understand, so I give them as much as I can give them, hoping that I am exposing them to as much as possible so that they have a better chance to learn. I think by even exposing my students to labeling, text supported pictures and symbols, books, and structured literacy learning activities, my students can and will bring something out of this type of instruction. I think it is important to not assume, and teach everything.”

School Age Teacher #4: “Literacy instruction means teaching to the student. So many students have different abilities that we see here, and we need to provide literacy instruction specific and tailored to the student. So many of my students do literacy learning in individualized ways, however we do a literacy center daily together each day. I make sure to start with the basics and tend to re-teach often. I tend to try to make sure to include literacy in many activities throughout the day and always in my structures learning groups in one form or another.”

Overall, the School Age Teachers mentioned that they find that practicing the important daily skills (weather tracking, letter practice, review of writing personal information such as phone number and address) assists their students’ abilities to relay important information about themselves and thus, assist them in their everyday lives. All of the School Age Teachers noted

some sort of read aloud, whether it be student read or staff read. Thus, all students in these classes are being exposed to books in different ways. One similarity between the school age teachers is the common theme of teaching to the student and the importance of modifying instruction. All four School Age Teachers noted how carefully they craft their literacy instruction and how it was centered on the students' abilities in their classes, as diverse as they are. Another common theme amongst the teachers was their use of instruction time during group activities and structured activities like circle or morning meeting times.

How do you plan for literacy instruction for your students with special needs?

All six teachers responded that they find that it is important to have things set up and ready for students with disabilities so that the students do not have to wait... One teacher noted that she finds it important to set her students up with a firm understanding of what to expect for her literacy lessons. School Age Teacher #4 stated, "My students have a hard time waiting at times for instruction, so it needs to be accurate in the way it is set up. Each day I make sure I leave myself enough time to really think about what I need to prepare so that it is ready for the next day, and my students get all of the time they need and deserve to learn." School Age Teacher #2 noted that it is important to set her guided reading groups up with an extremely descriptive book introduction including visual pictures to help her students really visualize the book. As School Age Teacher #2 notes, "For every new book that I incorporate into my guided reading groups, I try to set my students up for success by granting them a thorough visualization of the book and to help them to know what to expect. It is important to walk through the pictures because some of these students rely heavily on the pictures to help them get through. This way, if they know what to expect and become more familiar and comfortable with the book, they can rely more on the text and less on the pictures throughout."

School Age Teacher #4 noted the importance of creating an interactive learning environment for her students because this helps to keep them engaged with the text and less distracted to have behaviors. School Age Teacher #4 noted, “When my students are engaged with the text, like making the sounds of animals in the book or doing movements like clapping for certain words or stomping, they remain engaged with the text and get a lot more out of it.” School Age Teacher #3 who has students in a wheelchairs took a while to think about this question but gave the answer, stating that, “I try to pick books that I feel my students can relate to in their everyday lives, even just by listening to the books I read aloud to them. My students cannot speak or write so I base my planning on what I know about my students’ backgrounds.” Preschool Teacher #1 noted, “I think it’s important to teach my students with disabilities from the ground up; it is important to start strictly with the basics and simplify language to help them better understand more. We need to remember to keep things simple and clear for understanding, as well as check for understanding.”

All of the teachers gave diverse answers, yet very important answers. I think that all of these answers could be modified and developed to be incorporated in any special education classroom, regardless of the types of student diversity within the classroom.

What types of literacy activities do you use with your students throughout your day?

In this question, I asked the teachers to offer insight on specifics that they use within their classroom in terms of enhancing their students’ literacy development. **Preschool Teacher #1:** “We do a number of things in our half day preschool day. Our first structured activity would be morning circle or afternoon circle in which we do things like sing different songs to practice our letters. We also have lots of visuals of literacy on display for the students to manipulate and observe while at circle. For group, we always incorporate some kind of literacy learning,

whether it be things like painting letters or using magnetic letters on a cookie sheet.” **Preschool Teacher #2:** “We practice literacy activities through our group and circle times. We only have a half day with the students, so we always don’t get in everything that we would like to. I try to make sure we do at least 1-2 things each day that revolve around literacy. My groups tend to look like mini books that incorporate letter learning and I always do some sort of read aloud activities before doing our groups or projects.” **School Age Teacher #1:** “Because I have lower cognitive students, we try to keep things simple in our class activities, however I too went to school for literacy and so I understand the significance of its presence in all types of classrooms, even if the students themselves cannot read. I try to make sure I open group activities with a relevant book that my students can relate to personally and that relates to the topic of the group activity. We also complete interactive stories throughout our day, as well as books on tape. Some of my students are higher than others and they have literacy goals based on their individual IEP’s that they work on in their work bins. These tasks are mainly matching and sorting letters. I make sure to display literacy details throughout my classroom.” **School Age Teacher #2:** “My students are higher functioning in the school, and we do a lot of literacy learning. We are one of the only classrooms that I know of that actually do guided reading groups in the school. We practice reading small chapter books and the students are grouped accordingly based on their skill reading levels. Our classroom has a huge library in it and we have multiple times a day that the students can relax with DEAR time to engage in books independently. We have the students practice their writing as well through writing workshop and work collaboratively to create reports with each other. We are pretty much a literacy family!” **School Age Teacher #3:** “In our classroom, I currently have cognitively low students in wheelchairs with a number of disabilities. It is very difficult for my kids to engage productively with literacy because they are

so low functioning, however we try to incorporate some literacy each day. We do a theme group with almost always has a book for the opening introduction of the activity. I do many books on tape/cd for them to listen to. I do things like incorporate different tactile letters into their sensory bins so that they get a feel for letters. My students do not write. I make things bright and visual for them to observe around the classroom and label everything.” **School Age Teacher #4:** “We do many things with literacy. My students are behavioral but can read some things and are practicing writing at this point. We do a literacy center activity every day, all of my students have writing incorporated in their work drawer systems, the students practice the letter of the week at morning meeting, and practice writing words that begin with that letter to place on the word wall. My students really love to have computer time where they play literacy games.”

The teachers describe tools that they use to fit their individualized students’ abilities, and they explain how they modify their instruction to meet the needs of their students. All of the teachers’ responses, both preschool level and school age level, are similar in the ways in which the teachers use many diverse group activities to incorporate literacy learning and development, whether they discussed groups, morning meetings and/or circle time activities.

I thought that it was interesting that School Age Teachers #2 and #4 discussed the implementation of writing in their instruction. Many of the teachers do some sort of opening or introduction with a book to engage the students and open the group through text in relation to the activity. School Age Teacher #3’s responses of incorporating tactile learning and familiarity of letters in tactile bins highlights that literacy learning can appear different, even through the different senses and multi-modal instruction.

How do you assess students in literacy instruction?

All of the teachers agreed that the school does not have any formal way to assess the students' progress in their literacy instruction, due to the fact that the school does not implement any formal reading or writing program. The school's curriculum is created based on the students' needs by the special education teacher.

Preschool Teacher #1: "I really do not have any way to assess my students, other than observing their behaviors and noticing what they do day by day. This is how I track their progress, although sometimes I take notes to myself of their progress to help me with writing my progress notes."

Preschool Teacher #2: "I keep track by myself and my staff keeping student goal sheets to track progress. Our school does not require us to assess formally, so I make my own sheets up and my own system. I also just track them by observing their behaviors."

School Age Teacher #1: "I assess my students by practicing skills being worked on on a daily basis whether it be one on one instruction, work bins, groups, etc. I keep mental notes and my classroom support staff fills out goal sheets to keep track."

School Age Teacher #2: "I usually assess my students by taking daily notes during my guided reading groups, and afterwards. I stay on top of my students' progress and have very structured track record keeping, done by myself and my staff."

School Age Teacher #3: "Because of the lower level of my students, I have to keep track mentally or within my notes. Many do not have literacy goals on their IEP's so we do not track this on structured goal sheets."

School Age Teacher #4: "Ordered goal sheets are crucial to maintain in my classroom by all staff involved throughout the day with the students. I make sure to write myself notes at the end of the day to keep track of my students."

One of the underlying commonalities in the teachers' responses is that the school does not require a formal tool to assess student progress and that it is primarily up to the teacher to decide on assessment methods. The main way, then, that the teachers tend to assess their students is through mental notes, observations and notes, and as goal sheets. Due to the small class sizes, taking mental notes can be easily done by the teacher after every day, however, when more formalized goal sheets are made, other staff in the classroom can complete these sheets and make comments all of which can assist the classroom teacher when it comes time to mark formal progress notes on the students' IEPs every ten weeks.

What do you find most of your students struggle with in literacy?

Preschool Teacher #1: "This year, my students have most struggled with identifying sight words. Right now we are practicing pre-primer sight words for some of my students, while others are still working on letter identification. It is hard to find the time needed with only having these kids for half of a day to get everything done that I would like to!"

Preschool Teacher #2: "My students have really come a long way this year in terms of their literacy learning. My preschool kids are on the younger side and still learning their letters and alphabet, keep in mind they are significantly delayed, but a few of my students are ready to start writing some of these letters. As of struggling, some of my students have had a difficult time with identifying letters that appear the same, such as letter b and d, O and Q, and so on. This can be difficult to teach."

School Age Teacher #1: "My students have really struggled this year with getting all of my students to respond actively with interactive read alouds. Many of my students do not visually attend when I read or will not chime in with me as I am trying to get them to engage with the book. Some really love books in general, it's just those few who do not that can be frustrating."

School Age Teacher #2: “Really, this answer depends on each individual student and their abilities. Each of my students has different things that they confront and have difficulty with. Whether it may be learning, practicing and advancing in their high frequency sight words, perfecting their writing, getting to know new vocabulary in chapter books, or getting their comprehension to excel. It’s hard to pinpoint just one area with the extremely diverse group that I have.”

School Age Teacher #3: “If I had to say what my student struggle with in terms of literacy, I would just have to be broad here and say they struggle with literacy in general because they are low functioning cognitively. It is difficult to know what they are learning because of their inconsistencies and because they are nonverbal students. I do the best I can to assess them, however due to their lack of communication, this is difficult. They struggle with learning and identifying letters in general, as in my class we have to begin with the basics.”

School Age Teacher #4: “What I am finding this year is that my students really struggle with identifying with books. They need assistance pulling out background information that they know and identify with. My students also have difficulty picking out books that are appropriate for their levels. They tend to gravitate towards books that are far too easy for them as they try to avoid a challenge. It is probably because my students have behavior issues and when frustrated, even with their reading, do not know how to handle such behaviors. Other things they struggle with are identifying sight words at times, some students have difficulty with silent reading, and making predictions and inferences. My students at this point have a lot of work to do with grasping the tools needed for strategies to instill within themselves to advance in their literacy learning.”

The teachers' responses were all so diverse and relate to their specific populations of students. I think this is relevant because it shows me that the individual teachers are taking into account how their individual students learn. Preschool teacher #1 stated that her students struggle with sight words which can be very difficult for students to learn, especially when these words are not high frequency words or words that they engage with often. School Age Teacher #4 also noted her students' struggles with sight words.

School Age Teacher #1's response is interesting to me because throughout my teaching experiences, I have always found that students enjoy interactive read alouds, so it is surprising that this group of students are not engaged with this activity. School age teachers #2 and #3 had similar responses in that neither one could pinpoint specific struggles of their students in their literacy development. School Age Teacher #4's response of relating to books was very interesting that she pointed this out that her students gravitate towards easy books to avoid challenging themselves.

What else would you like to share about literacy instruction for students with special needs?

Preschool Teacher #1: "It definitely takes patience to help students with special needs, not only in literacy but in all areas. Our students at this school need consistency as well as modeling and positive praise. I would say, practice makes perfection in this field and special education teachers are always learning themselves!"

Preschool Teacher #2: "That it is our job as special education teachers to not stick to a one size fits all strategy. We need to make sure that we are guiding our instruction to meet the needs of all of our diverse learners to meet their individual needs. Especially in this specialized school, it

can be discouraging and frustrating that our students do not advance as quickly as we would like. Literacy learning is difficult for all students, and we need to remember that in our teaching, and not to give up.”

School Age Teacher #1: “It is so important to incorporate literacy into our students with extreme disabilities, even if they are quite lower functioning. Just incorporating things like read alouds; grant students the opportunity to be exposed to text and letters, which is crucial.”

School Age Teacher #2: “No matter what types of students you have, it is important to try different techniques to see what works and what does not. It is also important to group students appropriately and allow for collaboration within the classroom. My students learn from each other all of the time, and this is important. It is important to not give up on our high needs students and keep faith in them that they can learn literacy, even if at a slower pace.”

School Age Teacher #3: “We as educators need to remember that not all students are equal with their literacy learning. We need to remember to have different books in our classroom libraries and make sure books in our classrooms are leveled appropriately and can relate to our students in that room. Also, be patient with literacy learning and remember that it can be very difficult, especially for our students to learn.”

School Age Teacher #4: “My advice is to make sure literacy learning is incorporated throughout our special needs students days, numerous times a day. It can be something so simple, to things more complex, but it needs to be present. It is so important to do simple things like labeling items around the classroom, this gives our students familiarity with letters and words commonly seen outside of the classroom which relates to their everyday lives. I would also suggest to keep things interesting and change things up, while setting your students up for success by telling them what to expect before each activity.”

The teacher's responses crystallized what it takes to instruct students with special needs. Preschool Teacher #1 emphasized the importance for her to remain patient with her students. School Age Teacher #3 relates to Preschool Teacher #1 on the importance of keeping and maintaining patient, as well as recognizes the importance of diversity within the classroom. Their responses resonant with me because I have found that teaching my students can take an extremely long time and their advances can appear very small. Preschool Teachers #2 recognized that it is crucial to implement instruction specific to each students' needs. School Age Teacher #1 notes the importance to incorporate literacy into all students' daily activities, even if they cannot read or write, they can still get something out of it. School Age Teacher #2 recognizes the importance of trial and error in this field; what works for one student may not work for another, or what works for one student may not work the next day even for that student. As teachers, we need to always be brainstorming and trialing new approaches and ideas to find ways for our students to be most successful. School Age Teacher #4 states the significance of switching things up and showing gradual change in the classroom, as well as the importance of incorporating literacy in multiple forms throughout the day.

Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

I designed this six week research study to explore two questions: *How can students with severe disabilities use play to achieve their literacy related goals, specifically in relationship to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?*

What specific types of play can students with severe disabilities use to achieve their literacy related goals, specifically in relationship to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?

I conducted my research in a specialized school designed for only those students with severe disabilities, located in western New York. The study participants were three students with severe impairments and disabilities: Sam, Abby and Rachel from my 7:1:4 classroom. In my research, I worked with the three students for five consecutive days for each type of play. I implemented two types of play into each student's literacy goal/work task, thus having a total of ten work sessions per student. I also conducted interviews with six special education teachers to gain their perspectives on implementing play and to learn more about their literacy practices.

Based on the case studies of the three student and the results of the teacher interviews that I presented in chapter four, I am able to make conclusions to my two research questions, recognize implications for students and myself as a teacher, and offer recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

Question One: How can students with severe disabilities use play to achieve their literacy related goals, specifically in relationship to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?

Students with Disabilities Used Play to Connect to Their Known World

Through my observations, Abby and Sam appear to be prime examples of how enabling students with special needs to connect to their own worlds can motivate them to learn and succeed. I created the game boards around both Sam's and Abby's personal lives, which gave them an opportunity to connect their home lives, something they both are motivated by and

familiar with, to their academic work. With Sam, the board game created had specific family members on it, names and pictures, to relate him to his known world, thus focusing and thinking about his interests rather than focusing on the demand. With Abby, the same was incorporated into her game board therefore placing the focus on the excitement of being introduced to something in their known world or home life that they could connect to.

Both students were familiar with a game board and how to play that type of game, however because I centered the games around each student specifically, they were both able to succeed further in their literacy development and make advances. I helped Sam physically maneuver the game pieces and cards for the games as he lacks the motor ability to do so on his own. Abby was able to physically maneuver the game cards and pieces but required some assistance from me and reminders to interact appropriately with the pieces.

Rachel applied her interest with playing with dolls with the puppet play and in so doing was able to enhance her ability to identify the main character of the story and/or idea.

All three students had some knowledge or familiarity about what to expect for the terms and conditions of the tasks, and all three were thoroughly engaged throughout for what was asked of them. Creating the specific tasks to be centered or focused around each student's known worlds helped him or her to take the focus off the demand activities being directed to him or her, and helped each student connect on a personal level to the presentation.

For all three students, an issue throughout the school year has been finding tasks to motivate them and encourage them from displaying non compliant behaviors. All three students have histories of displaying these behaviors when disengaged with tasks, and it can be seen throughout this study that by being engaged with the tasks that they were motivated to excel. Sam was able to focus on his family members and events presented in the game and thus, focus

on these rather than the demand of identifying his letters. The same thing occurred with Abby; she was distracted and focused on the enjoyment of her home life being brought into her school life, and was able to make gains with her letter identification through this process. I used a different approach with Rachel based on the different goals for her; however, I still designed the tasks around her interests, taking the emphasis off the demand and placing it more on what she wants to do or what motivates and interests her. Through this process, she was able to be distracted by the tasks (e.g., kinesthetic movement and puppets) and attend less to the actual demand being asked of her.

Students with Disabilities Used Play to Have Fun and Engage with a Literacy Task

All six play-based tasks that I used with the students engaged and motivated them, and enabled them to move from the school setting and demands that they were accustomed to a more motivating place to learn.

I recognized that the students were very interested in all of the different types of play that I used with them. Abby I was extremely interested in play-doh activities and play, as well as board games. Sam loves to fish with his father and play any type of game. Rachel enjoys creativity and imagination, thus I used the kinesthetic movement and puppet activities to her in this study.

I noticed that the negative and avoidance behaviors such as non-compliance and refusal to partake in demand activities, screaming, throwing, scratching and hitting that I had commonly seen with all three students were drastically decreased throughout the six week period, and were barely seen at all. Abby and Sam were engaged with the games that connected to their own lives, as both of their board games incorporated pictures, events and interests specific to each of them. Abby was also motivated by the play-doh task, even though she was distracted by it at

first, but over time she showed growth and understanding with the expectations as she displayed to require less and less prompting from me. She also displayed growth in her literacy development as her responses became more articulate and accurate as time progressed over the course of the study.

I observed how Sam was able to step out of the side room where his lengthy work sessions had been taking place all year and move into a more comfortable, less restrictive setting and pretend to be fishing, as he has done with his dad. This task was extremely engaging for Sam as he loves to fish with his father, and he thought it was funny that this was being brought into the school setting. Through this motivational task, he was able to connect and focus on the fun part of the task and less on what was being asked of him, thus succeeding in his ability to identify letters correctly.

I witnessed how Rachel was able to make connections with different puppet characters and step into a pretend world to play. She visually attended to many if not all of the puppets throughout the task, attempted to reach out to touch and interact with them and responded correctly for many of her responses, all things that she had not been successful with throughout the course of the school year as she did not respond well to demand activities as she is usually non-compliant for things she does not take interest in. She was also able to enjoy kinesthetic activities and complete the demands that she normally does not like.

I believe that all of the play-based activities provided opportunities for the students to step into settings and tasks that felt more like playing than learning, which sparked their interest, motivation, and enabled them to make progress. Rachel tended to visually attend to both the puppet task and the kinesthetic activities, which is not something that she does usually during demand activities. She tended to be completely non-compliant for demand activities and work

tasks. The same thing occurred with Sam; he tended to refuse to do his work through non-compliant behavior. He also neglected to activate his communication device throughout his work time. During this study, Sam remained engaged with the fishing game and the personalized board game. He smiled, visually attended and his literacy responses were more accurate than they have been in the duration of the school year. Abby's interactions with the board game and the play-doh were much more engaged and her motivation was active throughout the course of both tasks. She also tended to refuse work tasks and could be quite aggressive if the situation escalates. During these play-based tasks, she was quite cooperative and attentive, and her literacy responses were much more accurate throughout the duration as well.

I believe that it is so important to find the time to incorporate play into our students' work tasks to keep them motivated to learn. This idea relates to Stinnett (2010) stance on play within the classroom, who recognized:

The pressure for acceleration in schools is compounded by national policies that measure learning by tested isolated skills in individual learners. According to those with these expectations, the serious business of learning is to include mastering literacy and numeracy, not playing around with puppets and paper airplanes. (74)

Students with Disabilities Used Play to Incorporate, Reinforce and Improve Their Fine and Gross Motor and Speech Skills

Throughout all of the play activities I used in this research study, all three students were able to incorporate different motor skills that they needed to develop or improve. Sam was able

to work on his fine motor skills by helping me move the board game pieces and carrying out some of the wild cards suggested in his game such as, “Touch your ear for three seconds” or “Hold this card for five seconds.” He was also able to utilize fine motor skills with his attempts to hold/grasp the fishing pole. He utilized and strengthened his speech skills through the consistent use of the DynoVox system, his basic means of communication.

Abby was able to utilize her fine motor skills through the manipulation of the play-doh to create letters or at least create the lines need to make the letters, and further develop her speech sounds as she said the name the letter. She was also able to use her fine motor and speech skills while moving the board game pieces, picking up the cards and attempting to state and practice the letters as I instructed her.

Rachel was able to use her fine motor and gross motor skills for the kinesthetic activities during which she acted out the book. She used her fine motors to interact with the puppets. For example, she utilized her fine motor skills with the kinesthetic activities to imitate gestures, reach up high, attempting to sign, basically any direction given for her to use her hands. She activated her fine motor skills with the puppets as she reached out and touched them to interact with them. She utilized her gross motor skills with the kinesthetic activities while imitating gestures, like throwing a snowball.

Question Two: What types of specific play can students with severe disabilities use to achieve their literacy related goals, specifically in relationship to recognizing and identifying story elements and letter recognition?

Board Games and Interactive Games

I observed that Abby and Sam were highly motivated while playing the individualized, interactive board games that I created for them. I believe that both students responded positively and connected easily to the game boards because the boards help them connect to their

experiences outside of school. Both students showed the abilities to the best of their physical capabilities to interact with the games and maintained interest throughout. For example, Abby was able to follow the directions that I gave and physically maneuver the game pieces with minimal assistance. She was also able to pick up the cards as I verbally read them to her. Sam was not able to physically maneuver the game pieces or the cards, but we did so through hand over hand assistance so that he could feel the motions with his hands. Both students were able to follow my simple, one step directions to carry out the game.

I designed the game boards to be bright and colorful and to attract the students' visual interest; however, I didn't make the boards too busy so that the students were not over stimulated. The beauty of a board game is that it can be altered and modified to meet the needs of the individual students. Rules can be adapted and the goals can be designed around the students' learning goals. A game could be created for any subject area. I created the fishing game with Sam as a way for him to relate to his known world outside of school as one of his interests is fishing with his father. I took the demand portion out of the learning activity for him so that it would feel like fun to him, not a demand. His usual letter identification work tasks throughout the school year was very dry. My colleagues and I would sit in a side room and ask him to identify the letters one by one, quite frequently pushing Sam to shut down and refuse the task altogether. With the board game, he was able to focus on the new, exciting and relatable task rather than just finding the correct letter. This created a meaningful and motivating learning environment, which he was extremely engaged in and responded successfully to.

Sam's progress with his letter identification skills throughout the year was very minimal as many of his quarterly progress notes reflected that he had not been meeting the expectations. His progress playing the games for both of his sessions displayed growth in only the course of

ten school days, or two weeks. He was extremely motivated and responsive to both tasks and gave many correct responses. Abby also showed a positive response to both of her tasks and showed growth with her responses, which had been difficult for her throughout the school year. Her letter identification skills vastly improved in a short amount of time.

Sensory Based Activities

I decided to use sensory-based play with Abby as she has many issues with her sensory planning. She is very tactile defensive and will refuse to touch. She also has poor coordination with her hands due to her diagnosis. I was able to address these areas through our work with the play-doh and her manipulation of it.

Through the sensory-based play activities I infused letter learning. Over the course of the six weeks, Abby was able to make progress with her letter identification. Even though she was extremely interested at first in only engaging with the play-doh on terms that she wanted (e.g., only playing/manipulating the play-doh into balls, playing with it), over time she was able to help with the creation of the letters with the play-doh and she progressed with her verbally abilities in stating and annunciating the letters more clearly to me. Her overall progress with her letter identification literacy development greatly progressed over the course of only the ten school days, or two weeks. Before beginning this study, Abby struggled with her ability to identify letters, but through this process, she was able to identify, help create the formation and accurately verbally identify many of the letters when prompted to do so, showing growth in her literacy development.

All special education teachers I interviewed recognized the importance of repetition in their daily schedules for the students. They noted the daily routines that they carry out every day

in order to familiarize their students and help them become accustomed to the structure of activities and the flow of the day.

Kinesthetic Play and Practice

Rachel responded very positively to the kinesthetic activities over the course of the six weeks. She was highly motivated by movement and her use of her body through her body movements including tactile learning. In my previous experiences with Rachel, I realized that she is often a student who shuts down during demanding, structured activities and shows signs of aggression and non-compliance if she feels that she is being forced to complete an activity she is not engaged in or motivated by.

Throughout the kinesthetic practice and activities, she was motivated, smiling, laughing, visually attending to the story and the speaker, and seemed to overall enjoy going through the motions of the story through the use of her body. She also displayed growth in her literacy development as she was able to correctly identify the main character/idea of the story multiple times when asked. This was a vast improvement than before the study because Rachel had such a hard time with this given task, as she would not even visually attend to the task, often pushing it away.

Through conducting interviews amongst diverse special education teachers in this study, some teachers interviewed agreed that incorporating kinesthetic movements to drive their literacy instruction is beneficial to their students, and an active daily routine that they practice within their classrooms. For example, Preschool Teacher #1 stated for one of her answers that she uses actions such as clapping to take words apart, a kinesthetic movement to assist her students to gain understanding for phonemic awareness. This relates to Preschool Teacher #2's

response that, "During circle we sing songs which include clapping, snapping, and stomping for example to different beats, chants and words." As School Age Teacher #2 notes, "We do partner book reviews and book reports and incorporate lots of movement and/or kinesthetic learning in relation to literacy and the kids really respond well to it." School Age Teacher #4 noted, "When my students are engaged with the text, like making the sounds of animals in the book or doing movements like clapping for certain words or stomping, they remain engaged with the text and get a lot more out of it." All of the teachers incorporate kinesthetic movements to help their students relate to the literacy information through movement.

Imaginative and Dramatic Play

Rachel made progress with her literacy goals by engaging with dramatic and imaginative play through the use of puppets. Prior to the start of the study, Rachel would not visually attend to the story or the speaker, and she had a difficult time sitting appropriately in her chair. When I incorporated play into the character identification goal, I saw Rachel become much more engaged with the story because her use of the puppets offered her visual support. She also improved in her choice making as many times before when she was presented with choices, she would either choose without even looking at the choices to get the task over with or she would select nothing at all.

In terms of her goal to accurately find the main character and idea of the story, she displayed growth in this area as her responses were correct a majority of the time. This was a vast improvement as prior to the study, she would not attend to the task in any way; during the study she was not only attending but choosing correct responses to the task.

This concept was mentioned in the Preschool Teacher #1 when she stated, “The aides and I in the classroom help students during our play times to practice writing, even if it means just scribbling on paper for things like making grocery lists during dramatic play or saying letters during imaginative play.” This teacher clearly incorporates the use of imaginative and dramatic play to enhance her students’ literacy development.

Implications for Student Learning

Students with Special Needs Benefit from Individualized Instruction

I designed this study to include one-on-one instruction sessions for all three students. At the completion of the six weeks, Sam, Abby and Rachel displayed growth with their overall motivation and engagement with each task as their non-compliant behaviors drastically decreased and their involvement with each task greatly increased. Sam’s and Abby’s responses to their letter identification were greatly improved and more accurate than before the study. Rachel’s accuracy with identifying the main character and/or idea greatly improved as well with her accuracy. In all, each student displayed growth within their literacy development goals. My primary focus and attention was on each student during each of their sessions, and thus they understood that our time together was solely for them and only them. The students were able to focus in a work area free from other students and therefore distractions or any type of competition for my instruction. During this individualized time, I was able to modify instruction for their specific abilities and levels as well. Usually my colleagues and I are able to work one on one with students, but we might have to share the work period time with other students thus we do not have as much or enough time per individual student as I did in this study.

Students with Severe Disabilities Benefit From Repetition and Simple, Direct Language and Instruction

As the findings from my research reveal, students with severe disabilities benefit from language that is simple and direct and from directions that are brief and clear. During each interaction with the three students, I was careful to use clear and concise directions and wording so I would not confuse them with complex wording and directions. For example I used directions such as, "What letter? Find same? Who was in the story?" All my directions were very short, simply put, and direct for what I expected them to do.

I believe the three students benefitted from this type of instruction and language use because I set them up for success by providing clear understandings of my expectations from the beginning. Each day, whether it was the first day or the last, I reminded each student of what we would be doing for that day both verbally and visually, as a way to set them up with success for the expectations. For example with Rachel I would say, "Rachel, today we will be working just like we have all this week on finding the right character of the story. Remember yesterday how we used these puppets (puppets shown to her) to go through the story? We will do that again today and when we are finished, you will tell me who was in the story." I shared the directions for the session with them, and then repeated the directions throughout the week of sessions to ensure comprehension. It can take significantly longer for students with severe disabilities to build concrete understanding and thus, their teachers should use repetition to ensure student success.

During the interviews Preschool Teacher #1 noted, "I think it's important to teach my students with disabilities from the ground up; it is important to start strictly with the basics and simplify language to help them better understand more. We need to remember to keep things simple and clear for understanding, as well as check for understanding."

Students with Severe Disabilities Benefit From Praise

As the finding from my research show, students with severe disabilities benefit from praise and acknowledgment of the areas in which they excel or make progress. All three students responded positively when I praised their correct answers, which I could see was a high motivator for each student. For example with all three students, if they responded correctly with an answer, I would say, "Great job!" and I could see their appreciation of the recognition of their hard work, which would then create the drive to stay on task and try their best again in the future. Even when a student offered an incorrect response, I would praise him or her by stating, "Good try, but the answer is...." Although the student was incorrect in his or her response, I wanted him or her to know that this is okay and to not give up on working hard.

My use of praise seemed to motivate each student to keep going and a majority of the time he or she increased his or her performance of the task at hand. My use of praise in relationship to their motivation was clear, as their negative behaviors were far less prevalent compared to how each student usually act during structured work/demand activities prior to the study. I noticed a significant increase in all three students' level of motivation throughout the course of the study, which was very successful for their progress, thus helping them to make gains in their literacy goals, whether character or main idea identification or letter identification.

Students with Severe Disabilities Benefit from Practice and Repetition

I presented each student in this research study with tasks that were based on their abilities, interests and experiences. Each student responded well to their tasks and has a firm understanding of the expectations asked. Because of their levels of engagement and relationship

to the given tasks, the students were able to remain motivated throughout a majority of the tasks and sustain focus and interest. With practices of the same skills and activities over the course of the weeks, the students showed growth in their literacy development as they became more familiar with the tasks and expectations. Abby, for example, started out weak in understanding my expectation of how to manipulate the play-doh in the meaningful practice that I was asking of her; by the end of the week, she was able to reduce the amount of reminding and prompting she needed from me to direct her and was more experienced at this point to help try to manipulate the play-doh the correct way. Sam was able to answer more correctly with his letter identification skills and thus, improved with the practice of the two games over the course of the weeks. Rachel was able to interact with the puppets and carry out the kinesthetic movements more accurately and appropriately over the course of the weeks, given the more practice she had with each task.

Implications for My Teaching

I Should Create Instruction Centered Around What My Students Know

Through conducting this research, it became clear to me that my students responded well to tasks with which they had some kind of background knowledge. For example, Sam responded positively to the self reflected game board created for him because he was familiar with the people and events on it. He was also familiar with the task of fishing in which he positively responded to as well. Rachel was familiar with dance and kinesthetic movement as well as puppets, and thus, gave a positive response to these tasks. Abby positively engages with play-doh as this is an interest of hers, and therefore responded well to the letter identification task as well as the self reflected game board created for her because she could relate to the people and events on the board. When the students connected with the task and expectations I asked of

them and the task related to their experiences, they were much more successful with the task and the outcomes of their responses.

I Should Create Instruction That Is Motivating And Engaging

It is also clear to me that my students increased their productivity and accuracy when they felt engaged with the task. For example, Sam was extremely happy with the fun task of fishing out letter cards from the pond, something that he does in his real life and enjoys with his father. To him, this was something he found motivating and engaging, and thought was funny because it was different than what he was used to doing in real life. By doing this, he was able to be more successful in his letter identification skills. Because I had specifically designed the tasks for each student in specific ways, it took away the focus of demand for these students and brought them into a fun learning environment that felt more like a game or playing rather than work, thus keeping them motivated and therefore more successful with their literacy goals. By creating motivating tasks, the students made progress, which was displayed in the accuracy of their responses. I believe that it is important to create a fun and appealing learning environment for students so that they experience learning that is fun and can remain centered on the learning while they are playing.

I Should Use My Students' Needs, Abilities, and Interests To Guide My Literacy Instruction In Order To Be Effective

The findings from my research reveal that instruction should be thoughtful of and connect to student needs, abilities, and interests. I recognize that my instruction should be well designed and individualized specifically for the students in my classroom in order for it to be effective. In this study, I designed each session around the capabilities of each student as well as

each student's specific needs and interests. For Sam, I took into consideration that he does not have the physical capabilities to carry out many activities with independence, due to his poor muscle tone and motor capabilities; therefore, I needed to help him with hand over hand assistance for many things. He was still able to comprehend the activities mentally, but required me to physically assist him with carrying out the tasks. He was able to increase his ability to identify letter identification and his accuracy improved, which was the main goal of the study. For Abby, she was able to carry out some activities with independence but required limited prompting and physical assistance to do so accurately. The goals of her tasks were designed specifically around her capabilities, or what she could and could not do. This is the same for Rachel, who struggles with motor planning and control of her hands, specifically. Her tasks were designed for her to do a limited amount of functional tasks with her hands, but more to sit back, focus, and observe the tasks and then be able to answer the questions appropriately.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research the Use of Play with Other Populations of Students with Severe Impairments

If I were to continue this research, I believe that it would be beneficial to explore the use of play and literacy learning with a more diverse population of students with severe impairments. For example, I could incorporate play into the literacy goals of different types of students with disabilities, possibly higher functioning students, or students with autism or Down syndrome, or emotional disturbances/behavior problems. I believe that it could be beneficial to observe how students with which disabilities respond to specific types of play, and potentially offer insights into efficient instruction practices for the students. By incorporating play into the literacy instruction and learning of students with different types of disabilities, I could explore greater

options for what types of play could be incorporated. For example with, higher functioning students who have less physical impairments, could most likely carry out play literacy activities with more independence. A student with behavior management issues might be able to pick the directions of the expectations of a board game and carry out the steps easier and with more independence.

Research the Use of Other Types of Play and Literacy Development

If I were to continue this research, I believe that it would be beneficial to explore if and how other types of play support the literacy learning of students with severe disabilities. . By doing this, it would help me to see overall, which types of play such as dramatic play, imaginative play, sensorimotor play, active play, cooperative play benefit students' literacy development. . Through examining this further, I or other researchers might be able to distinguish the most effective types of play to assist students in excelling in their literacy development and thus help teachers provide more meaningful instruction. Specifically, in terms of literacy development, researchers might be able to distinguish, for example, what types of play help the widest range of students with letter identification, spelling, writing, character identification, story elements, and word study. If researchers studied these literacy goals through a wide range of play based instruction, we might be more apt to create more meaningful instruction and engaging learning opportunities for our students with severe disabilities. Liu (2008) highlighted the importance of diverse types of play. More specifically, Liu cited dramatic play as most closely linked to children's literacy development. She found that young children first direct objects to communicate thoughts, then they assume a variety of roles to isolate meaning from the objects. During play episodes, young children generally engage in

speech play to explore the numerous values in their language, maneuvering their actions with verbal descriptions. Speech play encourages the development of metalinguistic attentiveness, which initiates literacy as young children become conscious of the rules in their language. The social nature of play also develops intellectual development, of which sharing meaning through language is important. The inseparability of language and cognitive development corresponds with social play and emergent literacy. Children also gain the opportunity to share meaning with a partner in social pretend play and thus, work collaboratively and cooperatively. For students with severe disabilities, this connects to their development as if offered the opportunity to play cooperatively with others; they will learn diverse types of play as well as learn cooperatively from their peers and thus, obtain new language and other skills to further their cognitive abilities.

Research the Use of Play with Small Groups of Students

If I were to continue this type of research, one additional area that might be beneficial to explore would be group diverse special needs students together, administer play infused literacy tasks and observe how the students work cooperatively as a group to complete the task through the use of play. The students involved in this study, primarily do not work on their literacy goals in unison but in one on one instruction. This is because these students, as previously stated, work more efficiently in individualized settings and benefit from specialized and specific instruction. If a different population of students with a more wide variety of disabilities was introduced to the use of play during literacy instruction, the students might be able to work cooperatively and thus, work cohesively to learn from each other with the play-based instruction.

This type of research could potentially be beneficial because it could reveal what types of students respond to what types of play and how the play infused in their literacy tasks and

expectations engages and possibly motivates the students, and how students benefit from working cooperatively in groups with play-infused tasks. For example, researching how students learn from each other through dramatic or cooperative play may help researchers see more clearly how students work to help each other and what types of play are beneficial to literacy development. Teachers could possibly use the outcomes of such a study to group their students and create more meaningful literacy instruction that involves play.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this six-week study was to better determine how my students with severe disabilities and I could use play-based literacy activities to achieve their literacy goals and support their literacy development. I designed this study specifically to target three students' individual needs and interests to see how play activities might help them advance in their learning. Conducting this study has helped me notice the positive effects that play-based literacy activities can have on student learning and literacy development.

The experience of researching a topic that is relevant to my teaching practices and one that I find directly interesting and relevant, helped me improve and build upon my teaching skills. Conducting this study has enabled me to significantly refine my skills as a researcher. This research enabled me to work with familiar and unfamiliar colleagues in my school, and it has brought me closer to them. The process has expanded the ways in which I view my students and their abilities, and opened my eyes to new ways of teaching that I will implement into my work with my future students.

Appendix A: Teacher Interview Questions

- What does your classroom look like in terms of disabilities? How are you supporting your students in terms of literacy support?
- How would you define literacy?
- What does literacy instruction mean to you?
- How do you plan for literacy instruction for your students with special needs?
- What types of literacy activities do you use with your students throughout your day?
- How do you assess students in literacy instruction?
- What do you find most of your students struggle with in literacy?
- What else would you like to share about literacy instruction for students with special needs?

Appendix B: Student Goal Notes

Date:

Student:

Literacy Goal:

**Activity goal was
worked on (group,
work, other)**

**Type/description of
play implemented:**

**Student response to
play infused activity:**

**Other
comments/observations:**

**Plans for modifications
post session:**

Appendix C: Student Observation Sheet

Date:

Student:

Observation notes:

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