SUPERHERO PLAY AMONG
PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

by

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ABSTRACT

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In this microethnographic case study, the narrative superhero play scripts and stories of twenty-one four-to-five-year-old children were collected while children were engaged in naturalistic play within their preschool classroom. In addition, five of these children were selected to be interviewed based on interest and engagement in superhero play. The research was gathered in order to do a content analysis of the themes preschool children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play. The intent of the research was to authentically understand the underlying meanings that are associated with superhero play in order to inform the practice and curriculum development of teachers that can better fulfill the needs of children who engage in this area of play.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Superhero play is a type of dramatic, pretend, fantasy, or imaginary play that “refers to the active, physical play of children pretending to be media characters imbued with extraordinary abilities, including superhuman strength or the ability to transform themselves into superhuman entities” (Boyd, 1997, p. 23). Superhero play is placed in the broader context of war play, an invented combative play with pretend weapons or superhero action figures (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). Superhero play also embodies a subcategory of rough-and-tumble play, as children are often play fighting with the use of imaginary weapons (Boyd, 1997; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Pellegrini, 2006; Smith, 1994).

Superhero and associated play is a form of play behavior that seems to hold some significance for many preschool age children. Yet, it an area of play that is often discouraged in many preschools as many adults and teachers regard the play as unsuitable for preschool children to engage in because of the possible harmful and deconstructive outcomes on children’s behavior. Unfortunately, due to this, it an area of play that has been overlooked and therefore not frequently researched or directly studied.

Thus, little research or empirical evidence exists which could lead to the understanding or significance of superhero play for preschool children. When young children engage in superhero play, what meaning does it hold for them? What
themes do preschool children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play? This thesis was done in order to try to shed some light on these questions. The purpose of this microethnographic case study is to provide a window into the understandings and meanings that engagement in superhero play holds for a particular group of preschool age children. This study used naturalistic means for data collection, such that the meanings and themes which children addressed were based on their natural engagement in superhero play while in their regular classroom, not as a study which set up the environment in a particular manner.

In the succeeding chapters of this thesis, I attempt to clarify an understanding of the meanings and themes that a group of preschool children addressed while engaged in and narrating superhero play. In Chapter Two, I embed these questions into a current review of the literature which surrounds superhero and associated play. Since very little literature directly addresses superhero play, my intention is to deconstruct superhero play in such a way to better understand the concepts and themes which underlie it.

In Chapter Three, I describe the methodology that I used in order to answer the question of what themes children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play within the context of their classroom. This includes a description of the context and setting of the research, a description of the participants, the ways in which I conducted my research, a description of how I will assess my results, and a conclusion.
In Chapter Four, I present the results obtained from the content analysis of the themes that the participants addressed in their engagement in narrative superhero scripts, stories, and interview responses. The results are depicted using percentages of the frequencies of themes found in the content analysis. I present these results in three sections. The first section illustrates the thematic results of both the afternoon and morning preschool classrooms in which the data were collected, followed by the total narrative thematic results for all narrative superhero scripts and stories. The second section depicts the thematic results of the interviews with the participants. The third section illustrates the thematic results of both the narrative superhero scripts of the participants as well as the interview results categorized by the participants’ gender which was done to see if there was a difference between the themes that female and male addressed while engaging in and narrating superhero play.

In Chapter Five, I offer an analysis of the results illustrated in Chapter Four. The analysis is presented in three sections in accordance with the results. In the first section, I offer an analysis of the results of the total narrative superhero scripts and stories, then I analyze the results of the interviews with the participants, followed by an analysis of the results of both the narrative superhero scripts of the participants as well as the interview results categorized by the participants’ gender.

In Chapter Six, I discuss the conclusions based on my research. I also provide recommendations for building on this current study as well as a discussion of the limitations of this study and implications for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

War, weapon, and superhero play should not be viewed as different to all other forms of play...in order to understand and work with this aspect of children’s play we need to look beyond the weapons to the play themes which lie beneath the surface. (Holland, 2003, p. 15)

This review of literature will deconstruct superhero play in order to better understand the concepts which underlie it. This review begins with an examination of the historical context of pretend and social pretend play in terms of its relevance in young children’s developmental and learning processes. A significant piece of this process includes how children’s narratives correspond to their play which can be used as a tool to understand children’s interpretation of their knowledge and construction of life experiences. Following this foundational analysis of play, the review will illustrate historical aspects, definitions, and pedagogies of superhero play. Because very little empirical evidence exists that directly assesses superhero play, the literature depicts three main categories within superhero play including war play, media-based war play, and rough-and-tumble play which will be used to address aspects associated with aggression. The review concludes by deconstructing superhero play to further understand its underlying meanings. This deconstruction includes the depiction of a gender construct; affective construct; social affiliation
construct; fantasy and reality construct; and a moral, social, and political construct.

Pretend and Social Pretend Play

Pretend play, or pretense, is inclusive of symbolic, dramatic, or fantasy play that is inherent in children who engage with invented events, materials and character roles that are fabricated and altered by the players (Fein, 1981; Göncü, Patt, & Kouba, 2002; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Pretend means to symbolize meaning; thus, pretend play is a metaphorical activity that entails having children detach significance from materials, circumstances, or character roles (Erikson, 1963; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). In doing so, children expand their play schemas and scripts that enable them to portray these meanings through play (Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). By “acting as if,” young children can relate creative ideas to real situations (Fein, 1981, p. 1096). This produces meaningful make-believe conditions that are imperative for theoretical thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). Representative play, also known as pretense, has been classified as material (objects) or ideational (ideas) (Fein, 1975; Matthews, 1977; Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). It is suggested that as children age, the material form of pretense is reduced as the ideational form of pretense becomes enhanced (Matthews, 1977).

Pretend play usually appears when children reach about 12-to-15-months old (Fein, 1981; Piaget, 1962). It becomes more social and ideational after the age of 2 or 3, and enhances with age in occurrence, intricacy, and organization (Göncü, 1993; Fein, 1981; Kavanaugh, 2006; Parten, 1932). During the preschool years, play becomes more sociodramatic, also known as social pretend play, which entails the
compromise of character roles, conventions, play themes, and story progressions with others (Smilansky, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978). In order for children to play collectively, they must cooperatively build play symbols and ideas that will determine and sustain their play (Piaget, 1962). As children compromise their social play, it begins to develop into cooperative play and games with rules (Parten, 1932; Smilansky, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978). While playing, children are using intellectual and social skills, as well as signifying emotional occurrences substantial to their personal lives (Garvey, 1993; Seifert, 2006; Verba, 1993). “Play is the work of children” (Paley, 2004, p.1). It is essential to the development and education of young children (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Historical context.**

The intentions of play research are largely partial to the ways in which it is perceived and valued by people (Pellegrini, 2006; Smith, 2005). Inspired by Piaget’s work, many developmental psychologists and play theorists in North America during the 20th century have been researching the pretend play of children; while others, such as ethologists and biologists have been studying physical and social play of mammals (Kavanaugh, 2006; Pellegrini, 2006; Smith, 2005). A “play ethos” (Smith, 1988, p. 208) commenced from the 1920s to the 1980s, which accented the enduring benefits of play, such as problem-solving, language, literacy, and socio-emotional and cognitive benefits that are essential to children’s growth and mastery learning (Bruner, 1972; Göncü, Patt, & Kouba, 2002; Kavanaugh, 2006; Seifert, 2006; Smith, 1988).
Historically, seminal theorists depict nomothetic stages of development. The purpose at each stage of development is to attain mastery to progress to the following stage; for young children this is accomplished through play (Erikson, 1963, 1972; Parten, 1932; Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968). Piaget’s cognitive stages of development illustrate that 3-to-5-year old children are in the preoperational stage, when logic and reason must be assembled by children themselves (1962). Pretend play is a significant activity for young children because in order for them to comprehend something, they must realize it on their own (Piaget, 1973). In this way, children are dynamic participants in their surroundings; learning transpires due to the exchanges between children and their surroundings, and they construct reality through these occurrences (Piaget, 1973). This allows children to communicate significant experiences which they may not be able to convey elsewhere in order to develop mastery (Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Erikson illustrated the psychosocial stages of ego mastery development in which children use play to work through past disappointments and present challenges (1963, 1972). From this perspective, younger preschool children are experiencing the stage of autonomy, the capacity to develop independent thinking, and older preschool children work to create initiative, the power to select and arrange individual activities (Erikson, 1963). As children explore ideas of independence, proficiency, and initiative through play, it frequently resembles conflict as children attempt to establish power that is attuned with adult prohibitions (Erikson, 1963, 1972). As children play, they use representations from personal occurrences that
have affective significance to their lives (Erikson, 1963, 1972). Therefore, play becomes a way for children to work through meaningful experiences, master anxieties and progress to subsequent phases of development (Bretherton, 1989; Erikson, 1972; Göncü et. al., 1993; Piaget, 1962; Singer, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, the incentive to engage in pretend play has emotional influences which contribute to socio-emotional development (Erickson, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky explored the social distinctiveness of imaginary play needed to improve mastery, whereby teachers and more advanced peers could scaffold learning through the zone of proximal development (1978). This zone of proximal development is the space between children’s individual level of performance and the prospective performance with assistance from others (Vygotsky, 1978). When scaffolding transpires through play, it allows children to enhance their performance greater than under ordinary conditions (Vygotsky, 1978). In order to gain the most potential through the zone of proximal development, scaffolds should come from the innate interests and choices of the children themselves (Jones & Cooper, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). This zone of proximal development has influenced the overall understanding of the function that social experiences has relevant to children’s development and learning (Harkness, 2003).

Piaget also depicted that preoperational children are egocentric, unable to acknowledge multiple perspectives until the age of 7 (Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Thus, they are unable of decenter, or experience alternative points of view, which is required for sustained social affiliation (Piaget, 1962; Piaget &
Inhelder, 1969). Others believe the capability to decenter and empathize occurs much earlier through embedded language and play (Donaldson, 1978). When children engage in activities that are inclusive of their embedded developmental schema, such as escape and pursuit rooted in good-guys-and-bad-guys stories, then the play is more understandable to young children, and they are better able to realize other perspectives (Donaldson, 1978). Embedded meaning and knowledge can best be understood through children’s natural, self-initiated experiences; this is what young children have power over (Donaldson, 1978; Paley, 1988).

In more recent times, it is portrayed that there may be a relationship between taking others perspectives through dramatic role playing and developing a theory of mind which is the consideration that others have views distinct from one’s own (Kavanaugh, 2006; Singer, 1994; Smith, 2005). Through modeling and engaging in sociodramatic play with children, preschool teachers may better be able to guide and instruct these abilities in children (Smith, 2005). The notion of the context of play has been expanded on by many professionals who emphasize that children cannot be observed without consideration of their developmental circumstances (Harkness, 2002; Kessen, 1979). This dynamic and mutual relationship between the individual and their surroundings is indentified as continuous development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006). This means that individual children and the context of their surroundings are not mutually exclusive (Harkness, 2002). From this premise, the benefits of children’s play behavior can only be considered in the context of its own moment in time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Harkness, 2002; Jones &
Cooper, 2006; Lerner, 2006). One way to identify with these embedded meanings of children’s play is through examining the contextual narrative scripts of children (Eckler & Weininger, 1989; Jones & Cooper, 2006). Through symbolization of play, children grow to be storytellers, inventors of narratives in which their awareness is embedded in their actions, character roles, and scripts (Donaldson, 1978; Dyson, 1997; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Jones & Reynolds, 2006; Paley, 1984; 1988).

*Pretend play and narration.*

The notion of scripts is used to understand how children categorize, express, and relate their pretend play meanings through circumstances, materials, and character roles (Eckler & Weininger, 1989). As children play, their scripts, narratives, and stories convey affectively significant experiences (Eckler & Weininger, 1989; Fein, 1987, 1989; Fein & Glaubman, 1993). Narrative thought is an essential tool for the mind to comprehend life occurrences (Bruner, 1990). It provides a context for children to build individuality and to interpret their social understanding (Fein & Glaubman, 1993; Fox, 1993; Kyratzis, 2000; Lindqvist, 2003; Mallan, 1998; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007; Paley, 1984). Similar to representational play, narrative thought elucidates a twofold reality, an immediate reality and a figurative reality that are formed by children’s interpretation of and relationship with the world (Bruner, 1990; Fein & Glaubman, 1993; Mallan, 1998; Nicolopoulou, 1997).

Children’s narratives include both practical and extraordinary elements that come from an array media sources (Fox, 1993; Verba, 1993). These stories present a
structure through which children can play out desires or concerns in their own lives (Howarth, 1989; Mallan, 1998). Much of the pretend play of young children comes from these imaginary tales which reveal children’s legitimate attraction to them (Dyson, 1997; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Paley, 1984). Ethnographers in kindergartens describe numerous acts of fantasy superhero play through children’s free play, narratives, and dramatizations (Dyson, 1997; Paley, 1984, 1988). Children seem to enjoy performing and narrating superhero stories, which exemplifies the importance of examining this area of play (Baker & Raney, 2007). Children’s narratives present a wealth of information to comprehend their understandings, but in order to properly evaluate these, narrative construction should take place in a context that is genuinely meaningful to the children themselves (Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007). Thus, because superhero play seems to be meaningful to many children’s play and narratives, qualitative studies that focus on the narratives of children while engaged within the context of superhero play could contribute to an understanding of its meaning and intricacy for children (Caulfield, 2002).

In sum, pretend play and narratives provide a means through which children can construct and interpret knowledge and understandings of their environments in order to master significant experiences that are meaningful to their lives. Adults and educators can foster development and mastery through scaffolding experiences that come from the self-initiation of children’s innate interests found within contexts that are authentic and meaningful to children. Through these experiences, children’s embedded knowledge and meanings are conveyed; thus, children become better able
to decenter and experience mastery. Much of children’s play and narrative interests are portrayed through their engagement in superhero play which is rooted in themes related to children’s developmental schema such as capture and rescue, submit and vanquish, and attack and flee (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990; Dyson, 1997; Holland, 2003). In order to better understand the relative nature associated with this area of play, the following section addresses the historical context and pedagogies surrounding superhero play.

**Superhero Play**

Superhero play is a type of dramatic, pretend, fantasy, or imaginary play that “refers to the active, physical play of children pretending to be media characters imbued with extraordinary abilities, including superhuman strength or the ability to transform themselves into superhuman entities” (Boyd, 1997, p. 23). Superhero play is placed in the broader context of war play, an invented combative play with pretend weapons or superhero action figures (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). Superhero play also embodies a subcategory of rough-and-tumble play, as children are often play fighting with the use imaginary weapons (Boyd, 1997; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Pellegrini, 2006; Smith, 1994).

**Historical context.**

In order to understand superhero play specifically, one must look to the broader context of war play. Historical records have documented that children have engaged in war play for generations (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1991, 2006; Holland, 2003; Smith, 1994). During the 1800s to the mid-1900s, children
commonly emulated and produced conflict themes of real community heroes, such as cowboys, pioneers, law enforcement, and the armed forces (French & Pena, 1991; Kline, 1993; Kostelnik, et. al., 1986; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1961). More recent heroes, now seen as superheroes, progressed in the United States throughout the 1940s and 1950s through various sources of media (Dyson, 1997; French & Pena, 1991; Kostelnik et. al., 1986). Due to this change, there has been an increase of theatrical conflict themes in young children’s play that involve media-based superhero characters (French & Pena, 1991; Paley, 1984; Singer & Singer, 1981). The media now plays a key role in influencing the superhero and war play of children which has become a controversy among those who work with children (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990, 2006).

Since the Federal Communications Commissions’ (FCC) deregulation of children’s media in 1984, this controversy has grown (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990, 2006; Parsons & Howe, 2006). The FCC oversees the television business and is intended to certify that valuable programs are shown to children, while also regulating the distribution of toys that are associated with television (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, 1995; Parsons & Howe, 2006). Due to this deregulation, the relation between television and toys has amplified the quantity of media violence promoted to children (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, 1995; Parsons & Howe, 2006). As a result, early childhood educators have become apprehensive about the negative repercussions of the associated play within their classrooms (Boyd, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). These
concerns include escalating levels of recurring aggression; replication of media-based hostility; dependence on hostility to solve problems; gender stereotypes; limitations on creativity; desensitization to violence; uncertainty between fantasy and reality; and affiliation of harmful political, moral, and social ideals (Boyd, 1997; Boyatzis, 1995; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; 1990, 2006; Gronlund, 1992; Kuykendall, 1995). Some of the positive connotations associated with superhero and war play include enhancing social prompts, developing dichotomous and mutual roles, self-regulating emotions, comprehending real violence, working on socio-emotional concerns, developing problem-solving and collaboration skills, performing make-believe stories, and developing stories and scripts of their own (Boyd, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, 2006; Greenburg, 1995; Holland, 2003; Kostelnik et. al., 1986; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Smith, 1994).

*Pedagogy and practice.*

Many early childhood teachers question how to approach superhero and war play in their classrooms (Boyd, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin; 1987, 1990, 2006; Greenberg, 1995; Gronlund, 1992; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Kostelnik et. al., 1986). The two sides of this debate can be best understood through the philosophic views known as the sociopolitical perspective and the developmental perspective (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Caulfield, 2002).

The sociopolitical perspective states that the viewpoints, actions, and ideals that children are developing through superhero and war play are influenced by the media and culture of society (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). This teaches
children detrimental moral, social, and political lessons about hostile behavior that they will use to solve problems as adults (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Moore, Lare, & Wagner, 1985). By allowing this media-based war play in the classroom, educators are assisting in the construction of these ideals (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Moore, Lare, & Wagner, 1985). The classroom strategy associated with the sociopolitical perspective is to forbid all forms of war play, known as the zero tolerance approach (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Holland, 2003).

In contrast, the developmental perspective asserts that play is the most important way in which children assure their needs and sort out developmental concerns (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Piaget, 1962; Smith, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, it is the responsibility of the teacher to cultivate children’s development through play (Elkind, 1976). The frequency of children who engage in superhero play elucidates the idea that it must have importance to these children (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Dyson, 1997; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Paley, 1984, 1988). Because of this implication, educators could use superheroes and related play as a method to validate children’s interests and needs by facilitating more beneficial ways of problem-solving that differ from what is illustrated through the media (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Boyd, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Dyson, 1997; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Kostelnik, et. al., 1986; Parsons & Howe, 2006).
This area of play, though disconcerting to many adults, is primary to the fantasy and social lives of many children (Dyson, 1997; Holland, 2003; Kostelnik, 1986). Because of the dissimilarity in developmental cognition between children and adults, children do not make the same theoretical association with real violence as adults do (Holland, 2003). The pretend function of superhero and war play has a different connotation for children than for adults, and it is not as associated with real violence for children (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Holland, 2003). Children’s rational comprehension of the world is construed according to their cognitive and developmental makeup (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Preoperational children are unable to conserve (keep the beginning, middle and end of a process in mind to make logical assumptions) or classify consistently according to more than one dimension (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). Thus, during superhero and war play, children can take on binary roles and pretend to hurt someone without consideration for the repercussions outside of the play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1986, 2006). Young children are also static thinkers, able to focus on one particular characteristic, material, or situation at a time (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). Because of this, when engaging in superhero and war play, children can pretend to hurt someone in one instant and play with that person in the next instant, thinking about the present moment and not on what happened beforehand (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). Thus, from a developmental perspective, there is not a correlation between
young children’s pretend superhero and war play and real life hostility; it is instead meeting some innate developmental need (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). Developmentally appropriate education builds on the naturalistic enthusiasm of children to create a sense of autonomy, initiative, and continuous development (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Pretense is extremely valuable to preschool children and is considered a developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Seifert, 2006). Thus, continued occasions for self-initiated play that come from children’s natural interests and affective experiences should govern the play (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Jones & Cooper, 2006; Lindqvist, 2003). In order for children to suit their individual needs and expand their understandings, they should have control over selecting the themes of play (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple 1997; Jones & Cooper, 2006; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Neumann, 1971).

There is little empirical evidence which represents either the positive or negative consequences of superhero or war play which makes it difficult to authentically assess. From a developmentally appropriate perspective, if superhero and war play comes from children’s self-motivated interests that express significant experiences or fulfill some inherent need, then it should be validated, cultivated, and scaffolded by educators so that children can experience initiative though their play to enhance mastery and development. However, practitioners of both perspectives convey concern about the hostile behaviors that superhero and war play seem to elicit from children’s repertoire (Boyatzis, 1995; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006;
Gronlund, 1992; Kuykendall, 1995; Whiren, & Stein, 1986). The next section will address the aggression associated with superhero play composed of three categories: war play, the media, and rough-and-tumble play.

**Superhero Play and Aggression**

There is much concern as to whether playing with superhero or war toys, watching violent television content, or engaging in rough-and-tumble play elicits hostile conduct in young children (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Caulfield, 2002; Conner, 1991; Smith, 1994). When trying to understand the degree to which superhero or war play is eliciting recurring, replicated, and hostile behaviors in children’s conduct, it is important to recognize the difference between real and pretend aggression. Superhero play is not considered actual aggression (Smith, 1994). Real aggression, characterized by a dominant aggressor and negative affect, involves intention to harm (Caulfield, 2002; Connor, 1991; Pellegrini, 1991, 2005; Smith, 1994). Real aggression is generally relational (due to relationships) or instrumental (due to disagreement over materials) (Pellegrini, 2005; Watson & Peng, 1992). Pretend aggression, characterized by the playfulness of a positive affect, takes place between acquiescent individuals and does not have the intention to harm (Caulfield, 2002; Connor, 1991; Pellegrini, 1991, 2005; Smith, 1994). Pretend aggression generally involves the use of materials to act out scripts and sustain social play (Watson & Peng, 1992).
**Superhero and war toys.**

Very little empirical data exist which exclusively address play with superhero toys (Caulfield, 2002; Parsons & Howe, 2006). Therefore, it is useful to look at war play that includes play fighting with combative materials which entails research that is quite mixed (Goldstein, 1995). Combative war toys are generally coded as guns, military props, and other materials which may be used as weapons. The cuing effect theory depicts that playing with aggressive materials will invoke parallel aggressive actions from children’s repertoire (Berkowitz, 1984, 1993; Watson & Peng, 1992).

Play with combative toys, as opposed to domestic toys (family or community), is associated with increased levels of pretend or fantasy aggressive behavior (Potts, Huston, & Wright, 1986; Wolf, 1976). Play with combative toys is also associated with increased levels of real aggressive behavior (Feshbach, 1956; Turner & Goldsmith, 1976; Watson & Peng, 1992). In some instances, the aggressive behavior depicted as an effect of play with combative toys is not clear as to whether the behavior is pretend or real aggression (Mendoza, 1972). Play with combative toys has no significant difference on real aggressive behavior (Connor, 1991; Etaugh & Happach, 1979; Parsons & Howe, 2006). Engagement of children themselves in combative play games also has no significant relationship with real aggressive behavior (Boyd, 1997; Connor, 1991; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Paley, 1984, 1988; Wegener-Spohring, 1989).

Children engage in a higher frequency of combative play episodes when playing with superhero action figures than when playing with domestic toys which
exemplifies a inclination to enact themes from the materials provided (Caulfield, 2002; Parsons & Howe, 2006). However, particularly for boys, pretend aggression using fantasy materials was evident in both the war play and domestic conditions (Caulfield, 2002; Parsons & Howe, 2006). Toys do not seem to independently elicit children’s ensuing behavior; instead, it seems that children and toys interact with each other in a reciprocal way (Goldstein, 1995; Pellegrini & Jones, 1994; Sutton-Smith, 1988; Watson-Peng, 1992). Characteristics of individual children, such as biological sex, social gender, age, disposition, as well as context give significance to the materials and ensuing behavior (Pellegrini & Jones, 1994). It may be that combative themes appear despite the materials with which children are playing due to themes that already exist in children’s play repertoire (Caulfield, 2002; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Sutton-Smith, 1988). It is also likely that children with more aggressive temperaments reveal fantasy hostility regardless of the materials (Conner, 1991; Dunn & Hughes, 2001; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Sutton-Smith, 1988). Although boys express power through war play, girls do not consistently assert power or aggression when playing with war toys; however, they do when playing with dolls, displaying power through family character roles (Connor, 1991).

These findings are not generalizable due to the small sample sizes, short-term results, and disregard for context; also, perceptions of aggression fluctuate which makes it complicated to authentically interpret situations (Caulfield, 2002; Connor, 1991; Goldstein, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1988). Superhero and war play seem

*Superhero play and the media.*

Superhero play is considered a media-based form of war play which is thought to play a considerable role in influencing children’s judgments, behaviors, scripts, and themes of play (Boyatzis, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Dyson, 1997; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Paley, 1984). Preschoolers generally watch up to 30 hours of television a week which to a large extent consists of violent animation (Huston & Wright, 1997; Simmons, Stalsworth, & Wentzel, 1999). Due to developmental restrictions, young children are incapable of relating events, intentions, and penalties shown on these programs which cause them to mimic actions without assimilating ideas or generating meaningful understandings (Boyatzis, 1995; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Evra & Kline, 1990; Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Ostrov, 2006).

Piaget describes an essential division between play and imitation (1962). During play, children experience cognitive disequilibrium whereby their thoughts about how the world works are confronted because they are faced with something new and become rather confused (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Piaget, 1962). In order for this new information to make sense, children use assimilation in which new elements of occurrence are integrated into existing structures of thoughts or schemas (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Piaget, 1962). Children also use accommodation, whereby structures of thoughts are changed to conform to the new circumstance by
assuming new external structures or schemas for behaviors (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Piaget, 1962). If assimilation dominates the play, children incorporate new information to fit their personal needs and structures of thought, have power over their play, and establish the scripts to signify new understandings (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Piaget, 1962). If accommodation dominates the play, children replicate and conform to external schemas of behavior (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Piaget, 1962). Assimilative play cannot independently stimulate genuine learning; children must relate ideas and actions through the replication of accommodation so that newly acquired skills become integrated and internalized (Piaget, 1962). Likewise, accommodation cannot independently stimulate genuine learning; each time something is mimicked, children must alter it through play to integrate and internalize the behavior (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006; Levin, 2003; Holland, 2003; Piaget, 1962). In order for mastery learning to take place, equilibrium must be present between assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1962). This interactive equilibrium between the two is known as adaptation, whereby children both modify their surroundings to meet individual needs as well as modify themselves to meet the demands of their surroundings (Piaget, 1962). Children who continually view hostile problem-solving actions through the media become more conscious of these activities and tend to reproduce the behaviors (Baker & Raney, 2007; Huesmann, 1986; Rule & Ferguson, 1986). If teachers are able to guide these mimicked behaviors in the classroom, children may adapt to discover more beneficial problem-
solving techniques through play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Holland, 2003). However, if children cannot play out these actions, they may repeat them without adapting new techniques for problem-solving (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Holland, 2003).

The influence of television can be observed in children’s play, though its outcome on behavior is difficult to reliably evaluate (Baker & Raney, 2007; Paley, 1984). The impact of aggressive content on children’s successive behavior seems to have negative repercussions across development which includes children developing hostile schemas and scripts for problem solving, reproducing behaviors, tolerating violence as normal, and desensitizing children to violence (Anderson, et. al., 2001; Huesmann, 1998; Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Huesmann et al., 2003; Ostrov, 2006).

Social learning theory and information processing theory are both used to clarify how people obtain information from television (Bandura, 1973, 1977, 1994; Huesmann, 1986, 1998). A series of short-term studies with small sample sizes found that exposure to television violence may elicit short-term successive aggressive behavior when aggressive cues occur in real life circumstances (Berkowitz, 1984, 1993; Bandura, 1977, 1994; Boyatzis, 1995; Huesmann, 1986, 1998; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Potts, Huston, & Wright, 1986). However, these outcomes should be interpreted carefully as numerous variables were not considered. Additionally, children examined the content outside of their usual classrooms that do not allow television, and it is not apparent if the succeeding behavior was real or pretend aggression. Extensive contact with aggressive content affects lasting
cognition and performance, particularly when children relate to characters or believe that television corresponds to reality (Anderson et al., 2001; Bandura, 1973, 1994; Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Huesmann, Moise-Tutus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003; Ostrov, 2006). Most long-term studies that look at the consequences of media have used interviews or non-empirical research which presents slight substantiation to confirm real hostile behavior (Ostrov, 2006).

There are no overall associations between viewing violence in preschool years and aggressive outlooks later in life; rather, it is individual variation in the quantity of violence viewed, along with children’s general participation in television that influences aggression in adolescence (Anderson et al., 2001). High participation in television consists of children’s absorption with characters that is practiced through their play themes and scripts, making children more inclined toward hostile behavior during adolescence (Anderson et al., 2001). Children with low participation in television, scripts, or themes in play demonstrate less successive hostile behavior (Anderson et al., 2001). It is not clear whether participation in television themes through children’s play takes place with or without the facilitation of adults, and whether or not this is a factor in what behaviors are learned. When television characters are eye-catching, animated, powerful, and easy to relate to as role models, it enhances the probability that children will replicate their behaviors and apply them to their forms of play (Baker & Raney, 2007; Bandura, 1973, 1994; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963; Boyatzis, 1995; Huesmann, et. al., 2003). Reproduction of violent conduct after exposure to violent content may depend
entirely on the context (Peters & Blumberg, 2002). One of the duties of an educator is to cultivate children’s skills in nonviolent conflict resolution; therefore, they could parallel the themes in the media to guide more constructive ways to problem-solve and direct play (Baker & Raney, 2007; Freire, 1998; NAEYC, 1990).

Superhero and rough-and-tumble play.

Rough-and-tumble play behavior is rooted in superhero play (Boyd, 1997; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Pellegrini, 2006; Smith, 1994). Rough-and-tumble play is defined as play fighting, wrestling, and chasing that is considered enjoyable, good-humored, and nonviolent by nature (Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 1987, 1991, 2002, 2006; Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Pellis & Pellis, 2006). Among primates throughout history, it is the most common form of play conduct, though it varies in an assortment of other species (Goldstein, 1995; Pellegrini, 2002, 2006; Pellis & Pellis, 2006). It was initially studied by social and behavioral scientists to investigate the social play of animals (Harlow, 1962; Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 2002, 2006; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Reed & Brown, 2000). Little data on rough-and-tumble play of human children existed until recently because this form of play was frequently devalued, perceived to be detrimental and destructive instead of recognized for its benefits (Goldstein, 1995; Pellegrini, 2006; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Reed & Brown, 2000). In the past, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) did not see the significance of this area of play and advised educators to stop rough-and-tumble play due to the behavior it produced in the children (Bredekamp, 1987). More recently,
however, the NAEYC advocates that rough-and-tumble play is a developmentally appropriate practice that is acceptable and advantageous for preschool children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Rough-and-tumble is seen as valuable to children because it is common among the youth of many mammalian species, signifying its adaptability and evolutionary abilities (Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 1987, 2002; Smith & Lewis, 1985).

Rough-and-tumble is often mistaken as aggression because initially, they may be similar to one another; however, they have discrete behavioral categories, functions, affects, structures, antecedents, and consequences which indicate intention. Play fighting, found within social play, is distinguished by a positive and playful affect which contains smiles and laughter, mutual role-play, prosocial manners, collaboration, and sustained social connection. Aggression generally accompanies a negative and serious affect, which includes scowls, one-sided roles, disconnection of individuals, and it usually takes place over a disagreement about materials (DiPietro, 1981; Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 1987, 1991, 2002, 2006; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Reed & Brown, 2000; Scott & Panksepp, 2003; Smith & Lewis, 1985; Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini, 2004). Therefore, because of the visibly distinct features of rough-and-tumble play and aggression, they have very divergent outcomes on children’s development (Pellegrini, 2002, 2006).

Rough-and-tumble initiates in the preoperational stage and persists throughout childhood later developing into cooperative games with rules (Pellegrini, 1987, 2002; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Smith, et. al., 2004). Vygotsky (1978)
asserted that play is a means by which children can practice skills necessary to become members of their culture. Therefore, rough-and-tumble may be construed as an aspect of culture essential for association among primates and other species to acquire important social information and attain developmental continuity (Pellegrini, 2002, 2006). Rough-and-tumble has beneficial social affiliations especially for preschool and primary age boys, but changes during adolescence when it instead relates to social dominance (Pellegrini, 1991, 1995, 2002, 2006; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).

Rough-and-tumble play is sometimes portrayed as disruptive and unfriendly behavior, but it is more accurately related to prosocial behavior characterized by companionship, caring, warm contact, nurturance, and cooperation (Reed & Brown, 2000; Scott & Panksepp, 2003). During rough-and-tumble, children often look as though they are smiling, happily embracing, and displaying kindness for one another (Donaldson, 1976). However, because observers often focus on the behavior independent of the context in which it transpires, the play actions are often misconstrued (DiPietro, 1981). Teachers notably mistake the conduct of pretend and real aggression, suggesting that many elements such as biological sex, social gender, age, socioeconomic status, and context are components of observation partiality (Caulfield, 2002; Connor, 1991; Costabile et al., 1991; Pellegrini, 1987, 2002; Pellis & Pellis, 2006; Reed & Brown, 2000; Sutton-Smith, 1988). Some teachers can distinguish between pretend and real aggression with precision and consensus (Smith & Lewis, 1985). Older preschool children can consistently make a distinction
between playful and real aggression (Connor, 1991; Costabile et al., 1991; Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellis & Pellis, 2006; Smith & Lewis, 1985; Smith, 1994; Smith et al., 1992; Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini, 2004; Sutton-Smith, 1988). Although these findings are not generalizable, there seems to be more consistency within this body of literature with less confounding results than previous studies that looked at aspects of superhero and war play.

Concepts of figurative aggression are customary among play therapists because through the display of symbolic aggression, children are able to express and enhance their needs, creativities, and role-play abilities which enable them to investigate content that may bring them stress (Goldstein, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1988; Watson & Peng, 1992). Aggression, both real and pretend, is learned through interactions with surroundings but can be used as an influential tool for guidance and instruction (Bandura, 1973). “What most children need is not the insight that they are behaving inadequately, but the means to learn a more successful way of behaving” (Bandura, 1973, p. 253). Teachers could use play fighting as an instructional approach to teach more tolerable behaviors, particularly among boys who rarely have access to socially tolerable ways to show concern for one another (Dyson, 1997; Paley, 1984, 1988; Pellegrini, 1987, 2002; Reed & Brown, 2000).

Some evidence demonstrates that play with aggressive toys and exposure to violent media may elicit children’s subsequent hostile behavior but is confounded due to numerous variables. Many aspects must be taken into consideration when addressing the aggressive nature of superhero play, including the coding of pretend
or real aggression, observation partiality, antecedents of behavior, the structure and function of behavior, consequences following an episode, and the context of which it occurs. Though adults often have difficulty distinguishing between pretend and real aggression, it seems that older preschool children can do so with accuracy. Rough-and-tumble play seems to be an innate behavior typical of most primates and other species. It may be that children view playful aggressive behavior as play and not aggression. The correlation among war toys, media, rough-and-tumble, and aggression still remains uncertain. The next section will address the deconstruction of superhero play to further understand its underlying significance.

*Deconstructing Superhero Play*

Considerations of war, weapon, superhero, or rough-and-tumble play usually encompass discussions about biological sex and gender socialization (Holland, 2003). Generally, children demonstrate distinctive gender variations during pretend play and narrative formation (Göncü et al., 2002; Kyratzis, 2000; Nicolopoulou, 1997). Girls often dramatize family and domestic scripts, whereas boys often act out extraordinary or superhero character roles that are more physically active and often resemble play fighting (Fein, 1981; Göncü, et. al., 2002; Holland, 2003; Howe, 1993; Libby & Aries, 1989; Smith, 2005). Girls’ narratives frequently include ideas about social relationships and connectedness of the group that use individual experiences to assert power inside of the group (Kyratzis, 2000; Nicolopoulou, 1997). Their narratives comprise more family and animal themes that often display kindness and caring for others (Libby & Aries, 1989; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Paley, 1984, 1988;
Boys’ narratives commonly have to do with power relations by means of a pecking order which frequently contain issues about disagreement, aggressive play behavior, commands, and disarray and which often use disobedient acts to gain power within the group (Kyritzis, 2000; Libby & Aries, 1989; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Pitcher, 1963). Their narratives are often comprised of existent or imaginary characters such as dragons, beasts, superheroes, or bad guys that frequently behold mighty power (Nicolopoulou, 1997; Paley, 1984, 1988). The social gender differences that are articulated through children’s pretend play and narration may be associated with more extensive issues of societal gender characteristics (Nicolopoulou, 1997; Kyritzis, 2000; Paley, 1984).

Boys frequently engage in superhero and war play more so than do girls (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Boyd, 1997; Caulfield, 2002; Connor, 1991; Holland, 2003; Marsh, 2000; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Smith, 1994; Sutton-Smith, 1988; Watson & Peng, 1992; Wegener-Spohring, 1989). Males of most mammalian species, including humans, have a natural inclination to engage in vigorous activities more than females (DiPietro, 1981; Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 1987, 1991, 2002, 2006; Smith et al., 2004; Smith, 2005; Smith & Lewis, 1985). During childhood, discrepancy in preferences of play is typically the consequence of both biological sex differences due to hormones and gender role differences due to socialization (Pellegrini, 2006). Introduction of androgen hormones of most males while in the womb incline them to need physical movement which is additionally continued through socialization to strengthen these differences (Humphreys &
Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 1991, 2002; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). It is also proposed that male partiality to rough-and-tumble is the consequence of males being more biologically and socially competitive and physically active compared to females which may cause them to replicate cultured behaviors attached with being male (Pellegrini, Long, & Mizerek, 2005). It is plausible that genetics, surroundings, and actions impact each other, creating mutuality between the biological being and their social surroundings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006; Pellegrini, 2006). Therefore, a biological assumption for behavior in a species is not exclusively valuable because of the infinite amounts of social environments that are available to analogous organisms (Pellegrini, 2006; Pellegrini et al., 2005). This is apparent as males and females observe, study, and apply appropriate social gender characteristics and roles through reinforcement of culture and society (Holland, 2003; Pellegrini, 2006; Pellegrini et al., 2005).

For many present children in the U. S., gender stereotypes are acknowledged through television content that can manipulate fondness for particular materials (Baker & Raney, 2007; Dyson, 1997; Paley, 1984). These stereotypes can help to characterize in children’s awareness what it means to be a boy or a girl; over time, as they relate to these stereotypes, they are more liable to reproduce behaviors and accept the ideals and attitudes of those characters as being true (Baker & Raney, 2007; Bandura, 1994; Bandura, et. al., 1961, 1963). Boys and girls assimilate and react in different ways to television because of their diverse associations and participation with characters, rather than just because of their biological distinction.
(Anderson et al., 2001; Huesmann et al., 2003). Current media superhero characters seem to be less focused on gender characteristics through underlying stereotyping than in the past (Baker & Raney, 2007).

**Affective construct.**

As previously mentioned, children express affectively meaningful experiences through play that are significant to their development and mastery of anxieties that cannot be met elsewhere (Erikson, 1963, 1972; Fein, 1989; Piaget & Inhelder, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, pretend play is a medium through which one can try to understand important experiences that are significant to children (Göncü, 1993; Göncü et al., 2002). Through fantasy play, children often work through disturbing or significant issues by constructing fantasy situations that replicate real concerns in order to achieve an understanding of them (Corsara, 1986; Dunn & Hughes, 2001; Fein, 1987, 1989). Children’s play themes and narrations are often about human emotions-good and bad-control, and caring, which act as a way for children to explore affective ideas relevant to their lives (Dyson, 1997; Paley, 1984, 1988; Propp, 1958). By comprehending the affective implications rooted in children’s superhero play, it may help to clarify its appeal and value to children (Caulfield, 2002). Children may express and alleviate emotional concerns through their superhero and war play themes (Paley, 1984; 1988).

In most cases, the emotional concerns that are articulated through play are related to the context and theme of play; likewise, the context and theme of play may be related to emotional concerns (Fein, 1989; Kyratzis & Guo, 2001; Parsons &
Howe, 2006). Through superhero characters, weapons, and war play, boys particularly convey the affective sense of power and control (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Boyd, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Caulfield, 2002; Connor, 1991; Holland, 2003; Parsons & Howe, 2006), whereas girls convey the affective sense of nurturance and relationships when engaging in superhero and associated play (Caulfield, 2002).

By exploring notions of power through play, children strengthen their levels of confidence as they struggle to become autonomous and initiative in their development (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 2006; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Kostelnik et al., 1986). By allowing children the initiative to explore superhero and other powerful roles through their play, adults can help children strengthen their abilities to master affective occurrences, expand skills, and create continuous development (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Boyd, 1997; Hoffman, 2003; Holland, 2003; Parsons & Howe, 2006).

*Social affiliation construct.*

During the development of most 3-to-5-year-old children, social pretend play or sociodramatic play becomes more typical as children progressively discover how to decenter (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Seifert, 2006). As children learn to take others’ perspectives, they also discover how to work out problems encountered during play and how to identify with and understand one another (Collins, 2002; Jones & Cooper, 2006; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Rubin & Howe, 1986; Seifert, 2006; Smith, 2005). By scaffolding occurrences found within the context of
children’s self-initiated and natural play, their ability to decenter, empathize, and strengthen social relationships can be increased (Jones & Cooper, 2006).

It has been asserted that various themes of play will affect children’s ability to cooperate within a group (Kyratzis & Guo, 2001; Nakamura, 2001). When children’s play is mutual and supportive, they will convey affective concerns and negotiations more often (deLorimer, Doyle, & Tessier, 1995). Thus, some claim that superhero and war play often turn into power struggles that may coupled with less teamwork and collaboration among players (Gronlund, 1992; Kuykendall, 1995). While others exemplify that when children engage in shared play with superhero toys, they display mutually cooperative negotiations with media fantasy characters, as well as self-regulate their play (Caulfield, 2002; Parsons & Howe, 2006).

When playing with fantastic toys, such as superheroes, the functions often remain unclear to children, and they must deconstruct and decode their verbal communication in order to comprehend and sustain the play theme because it is not clearly associated with reality; often this is similar to disagreements because the discussions are required to reach a common frame of reference to develop a script (Pellegrini & Jones, 1994). Thus, play with these vague toys, rather than overt toys, enables children to decipher meaning, create more original scripts, and strengthen social affiliations (Pellegrini & Jones, 1994). Generally, play with fantastic materials as opposed to practical materials brings out more shared themes among children (Neppl & Murray, 1997).
Supportive, social play is the foundation of relationships (Dunn & Hughes, 2001). When children show awareness and concern for each other, they build connections, cultivate understanding, learn to problem-solve, and enjoy each other’s company (Dunn & Hughes, 2001). Social play has many rules and structures with which children must comply in order to self-regulate personal actions and practice managing will power to sustain play (Vygotsky, 1978). When children engage in roles of superhero or war play themes themselves, they consistently convey self-regulation, problem-solving, and team work skills to prolong the play (Connor, 1991; Hoffman, 2004; Holland, 2003; Kostelnik et al., 1986; Paley, 1984, 1988; Wegner-Spohring, 1989). However, for some children who have an innate tendency to act in an aggressive or hostile fashion, engagement in play fighting may make it more difficult to control impulses and maintain a playful atmosphere (Dunn & Hughes, 2001).

Play is also associated with the ability to read social cues and regulate feelings which assist children in becoming accustomed to social relations (Pelligrini, 2002, 2006; Pellis & Pellis, 2006; Smith, 2005). Play fighting and rough-and-tumble in early childhood are helpful for obtaining social information because they are linked with the ability to take perspectives, problem-solve, and be flexible (Pellegrini, 1987, 1991, 2002, 2006; Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Pellis & Pellis, 2006; Reed & Brown, 2000). This is because such takes place between complaint persons who reverse roles, understand play gestures, and self-regulate to sustain the play which improves collaboration and social affiliation.

Fantasy and reality construct.

During pretense, because pretend events and behaviors entail intentional alterations, children ought to know the difference amongst the authentic circumstances and the imaginary circumstances they are performing (Lillard, 2001). Because pretense involves actions and situations that are conjured and altered, they entail partaking in a figurative reality separate from an authentic one; hence, most young children who pretend can distinguish between the two as they are they creators of the realities (Fein, 1981; Kavanaugh, 2006). As children play, they have to converse inside their pretend characters, but they also have to metacommunicate and use their existent identity to converse outside the play script which also assists in distinguishing between fantasy and reality (Göncü et al., 2002). In children’s stories, older preschool children can usually distinguish between imaginary and genuine characters (Peskin, 1996; Seifert, 2006).

Some propose that children cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality until about 10 years of age (Baker & Raney, 2007). However, engagement in superhero play involves partaking in distinctive binary character roles that may permit children to better understand the boundaries between fantasy and reality
Preschool children may confound the pretend nature of superhero and war play with real aggression (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, 2006; Kuykendall, 1995). However, many contend that older preschoolers can consistently discriminate between the pretend and real aggression of play fighting or rough-and-tumble, though children under 3 may have more difficulty distinguishing between the two (Connor, 1991; Costabile et al., 1991; Goldstein, 1995; Pellegrini, 2002; Smith, 1994; Smith & Lewis, 1985; Sutton-Smith, 1988; Watson & Peng, 1992). If children can consistently distinguish between rough-and-tumble and real aggression, it is probable that they can also discern between the pretend and real aggression of
superhero and war play since they are embedded in rough-and-tumble (Caulfield, 2002; Smith, 1994).

**Moral, social, and political construct.**

Some believe that children build destructive political, social, and moral values about conflict through superhero and war play which creates the groundwork for later values (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 2006). Yet there is little empirical verification to support this assumption. Children expand their ideas about conflict and conflict resolution through a long progression of assembly; from significant occurrences of problem-solving within their individual contexts, young children will initiate moral, political, and social notions about the world, instead of primarily from external sources (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Kamii & Devries, 1980). Children develop moral and social reasoning not only through regulations put forth by adults and society, but also through understanding of social interactions with peers and making sense of those incidents (Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1965).

Moral and social developments are understood through two constructs called domains. The moral domain attends to developmentally appropriate issues of wellbeing, justice, and privileges; and the social convention domain attends to socially tolerable behaviors (Helwig & Turiel, 2002). During the preschool years, children experience significant growth in the capability to differentiate between moral and social experiences (Helwig & Turiel, 2002). Children frequently use the notions of wellbeing and justice to conduct moral understandings (Helwig & Turiel,
2002; Wainryb & Turiel, 1993). Children intuitively react more regularly to moral infringement rather than social ones; often rulings of social violations come from children’s understanding of adult communication (Helwig & Turiel, 2002).

According to Piaget, there are two types of morality in childhood: a heteronomous morality typical of an egocentric child, which is a one-sided reverence for adults; and an autonomous morality typical of middle childhood, which involves a mutual reverence created through social interactions among peers (1965). Through the emergence of an autonomous morality earlier in young children, a succession from egocentrism to perspectivism can happen sooner (Helwig & Turiel, 2002). Yet when adults restrict children’s play because of moral beliefs that they do not comprehend, it holds them in heteronomous morality instead of expanding their autonomous thinking and morality (Piaget, 1965). Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on the danger of not permitting children’s superhero or war play simply based on adult values.

Conflict and conflict resolution that take place in the context of children’s circumstances are vital to allow children to develop autonomy which progressively expands into the concepts of initiative and self-efficacy (Nucci, 1996). It is through these concepts developed during early childhood that a foundation is created for the comprehension of politics, civil rights, and privileges, instead of from external sources (Nucci, 1996). Through practicing this autonomy, young children engage in a deeper understanding of how and at what time this independence and power should be used (Helwig & Turiel, 2002).
As children grow, they are learning how to construct social and political understandings and often rely on external adult sources of information (Barrett & Barrow, 2002). When educators and parents dynamically communicate and engage with children to help them to understand this information they can be attentive that the information that children are receiving is correct (Barrett & Barrow, 2002). Guiding and instructing children about how to understand and handle their concerns about violence and aggression are imperative because violence is ubiquitous and very much a part of our world (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Connor, 1991). Educators can use superhero play as a tool for influencing problem-solving skills and facilitating children’s expansion of moral, social, and political understandings to cultivate prosocial and tolerable behavior (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Holland, 2003; Martin, 2007; Parsons & Howe, 2006).

Prosocial behavior encompasses the concept of deliberate deeds that generate a constructive or advantageous effect which includes the ability to assist, share, care for, and protect (Grusec et al., 2002). Empathetic concern, which young children frequently notice, stimulates prosocial behavior (Grusec et al., 2002). The mutuality of relationships among peers facilitates empathetic concern, perspective taking, and prosocial behaviors (Grusec et al., 2002). The reciprocity of play fighting or rough-and-tumble found in superhero play may also influence these abilities. Children frequently act prosocially when activities entail the morality of wellbeing, justice, or privileges (Grusec et al., 2002; Helwig & Turiel, 2002).
Children may be attracted to superheroes and superhero play because of their power, as well as the moral and prosocial behavior that they encourage by serving and protecting others (Dyson, 1997; Martin, 2007). Children often display their fantastic and imaginary potential, and for that reason it is understandable why children are captivated with superheroes and superhero play (Dyson, 1997; Martin, 2007). When evaluating the relationship between children’s moral outlook about themselves and toward superheroes, children relate themselves equal to that of superheroes (Martin, 2007). Children signify that they see superheroes as fair, just, respectful, prosocial, morally apt, tolerant, and merciful (Martin, 2007). This supports the notion that children may acquire significant moral, prosocial, and empathetic values and ideals from superheroes (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Dyson, 1997; Martin, 2007). Some disagree and believe that superheroes are risky because they are praised for destructive conduct that children identify with and replicate (Bandura, 1973; Martin, 2007). Superheroes contain multifaceted characteristics that involve complex moral quandaries; some challenge children’s abilities to understand these views because they believe children cannot identify with and react to morally wrong actions (Martin, 2007). Yet, as previously mentioned, older preschoolers can identify actions that involve morality that violates the wellbeing, justice, or privileges of others (Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Peters & Blumberg, 2002; Wainryb & Turiel, 1993). Superheroes often try to circumvent destructive actions and allow it only to protect and defend the innocent (Martin, 2007). Thus, young children can
most likely interpret this as a moral act because it infringes upon the wellbeing of others.

It is evident that there are many concerns associated with young children’s exposure to violence and violent television programs. Yet, preschoolers consistently point to the penalty of a character’s behaviors as morally incorrect (Bandura et al., 1963). Merely examining preschoolers’ conduct after they watch violent television programs does not offer sufficient evidence about how they will conduct themselves in real moral quandaries; children may only be acting in regards to the realm of animation and pretend play (Peters & Blumberg, 2002). Adults have an essential role in persuading children’s conceptual foundations of moral and social ideas of violence, aggression, and conflict resolution approaches (Wainryb & Turiel, 1993). Consequently, it may not be introduction to the aggressive actions solely that influences children but how the actions are used to instruct and guide problem-solving, empathetic, and prosocial skills, as well as develop the comprehension of moral and social concepts. Adults could watch the television content with children and engage with them during play to model and talk about morally and socially tolerable ways to resolve conflicts (Peters & Blumberg, 2002).

Conclusion

In light of the research that attempts to deconstruct elements which underlie superhero play, it seems logical to conclude that it serves as an appropriate structure and function of children’s inherent developmental and learning processes. Superhero play seems to provide a context through which children can genuinely experience the
developmentally appropriate practice of autonomy and initiative as they work to
establish power through their play. This area of play seems beneficial as a means for
children to play out, work through, and narrate affectively important themes that are
meaningful and relevant to experiences of their lives. These themes which are
embedded within superhero play also seem to be analogous to children’s
comprehensible developmental schemas.

Superhero, rough-and-tumble, and war play seem to be inaccurately thought
to be due to the introduction of television or toys when they have in fact occurred
historically among primates, humans, and other species (Humphreys & Smith, 1984;
Pellegrini, 1987, 2002; Sutton-Smith, 1988). Existing reports of media-based
superhero play are just modern versions of previous varieties of children’s play
which are equivalent in their themes and values to young children (French & Pena,
1991; Paley, 1984). In fact, it seems safe to conclude that combative play fighting
has a positive relationship with social affiliation elements, primarily among male
preschool children. It is also evident that older preschool children can reliably
distinguish between pretend and real aggression. However, the boundaries between
pretend and real aggression are more difficult to decipher for children with more
aggressive predispositions, rejected children, adolescents, and adults. It may be that
children treat combative play fighting with weapons or superheroes as a playful past
time and not one of aggression or violence.

Research suggests that when children engage in a high participation with
television superhero characters, then they will experience more subsequent
aggressive behavior. Yet adaptation of play is essential to stimulate mastery learning, and therefore there must be a balance between children’s assimilative and accommodative superhero play. Thus, it is possible that when teachers seek to understand and engage in superhero play with children, they can help children to maintain this balance while influencing the schemas for conflict resolution, empathetic concern, and other prosocial behaviors. Superhero play is also developmentally congruent with the moral understandings inherent in young children that include the concepts of wellbeing, justice, and privileges of others. Since children use their social interactions and experiences to construct these concepts, by understanding and scaffolding these experiences, educators can use children’s superhero play interactions to better influence their social, moral, and political judgments.

The following chapter will explore the methodology I used in order to answer the following question of what themes children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play within the context of their classroom.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the methodology that I used in order to answer the question of what themes children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play within the context of their classroom. This includes a description of the context and setting of the research, a description of the participants, the ways in which I conducted my research, a description of how I will assess my results, and a conclusion.

Setting

This study began with my initial interest in the naturalistic play behaviors of children engaged in superhero play. At the time, I worked as an assistant teacher at a preschool located in a small rural Northern California town that accepted children ages 3-to-5-years-old. This preschool had one large classroom indoors that was broken up into areas that facilitate certain kinds of play including art, story, drama, large blocks, small blocks, snack, construction, and games. Located in the outside yard, there were certain areas as well which included an art table, sensory table, water table, woodworking table, construction area, large motor play equipment, sand box, and bikes. Within the school, there were two classrooms which operated at different times during the day; these included a morning class and an afternoon class.
which both operated for approximately three hours each day and had approximately twenty children in each class.

Additionally, the preschool functioned as a teaching facility which focused on guiding and instructing undergraduate students who had an interest in working with children. The preschool contained an observation room available for students, parents, and other community members to observe and research children. The observation room was equipped with microphones, headsets, and a double sided mirror so that the children in the classroom could not see the observers.

As previously mentioned, at the time of my initial interest in the study, I was working as an assistant teacher in the morning class. Often, I would spend some time in the afternoons observing the afternoon class. During the spring of that year, the afternoon class became particularly interested in superhero play. The philosophic foundation of the school tended to build on children’s natural interests and explorations, trying to facilitate and deepen understanding for the children. As a result, the teachers in the afternoon began to brainstorm ways in which they could facilitate superhero play for the children. The children became interested in rough-and-tumble behavior and playfighting, and so the teachers had demonstrators of various arts of war come to demonstrate and talk with the kids. As the interest progressed, certain areas became designated for this kind of play. With the facilitation of a teacher and many discussions about safety and reading social signals, the children were able to wrestle and fence. While fencing, the children would put on goggles, gloves, and capes and use water noodles made from styrofoam tubes that
were cut in half to play fight with one another. They had an area designated for this in the outside play yard, and for many children this became a routine part of each day.

It was the superhero fencing that brought about many of the narrative superhero scripts and stories into the classroom that became the initial part of my study. As I continued to observe the children, I began to think about how my dogs often play together, how they wrestle around, play tug of war, chase each other and pretend to bite one another for endless hours and then clean each other and fall asleep cuddling soon after; and now seeing these children, I wondered what underlying meaning this kind of play held for these children and how we as teachers could help to facilitate these meanings and understanding for the children.

My research continued into the second year at the same preschool, but this time with the morning class in which I was an assistant teacher. Superhero play became transparent in this class as well, although not in the same manner. The same fencing demonstrators came to visit this class, but it did not seem to fulfill the underlying need for these children. Their superhero play instead progressed through their play throughout the classroom with each other. These children developed narrative superhero scripts and stories while playing with regular materials and while engaging in dramatic play scenarios with one another. I collected data as these naturalistic superhero scripts occurred within the context of the children’s play. I wondered if superhero play had the same underlying meanings and themes for both
groups of children even though they seem to engage differently in each of the classrooms.

Participants

At the time of the initial part of the study, which took place during the second half of the 2006-07 school year, the participants totaled fourteen preschool children who were chosen based on their engagement in superhero play behavior comprised of their narrative superhero scripts and stories. At the beginning of this first part of the study, the participants included four girls whose ages ranged from 4.4-years-old to 4.11-years-old, and ten boys whose ages ranged from 3.7-years-old to 5.3-years-old.

During the second part of the narrative script data collection, which took place throughout the entire 2007-08 school year, the participants totaled seven preschool children who were selected and observed based on interest and engagement in superhero play comprised of their narrative superhero scripts and stories. At the beginning of this second part of the study, the participants included three girls whose ages ranged from 3.7-years-old to 3.11-years-old, and four boys whose ages ranged from 3.2-years-old to 4.8-years-old.

In addition to narrative superhero scripts and stories of the participants described above, I selected five participants to be interviewed in person based on their interest and engagement in superhero play. These interview participants included three girls whose ages ranged from 4.2-years-old to 4.5-years-old, and two boys who were 4.10-years-old and 5.3-years-old. All participants in this study were
voluntary and had received consent from their legal guardians to participate. I assigned pseudonyms to the children that are used in analysis and reporting in this thesis.

In this study, a total of twenty-one participants’ ages 3.2-years to 5.3-years old were observed. In addition, five of these original twenty-one participants were interviewed.

Methodology

I collected all observations and subsequent data of children’s narrative superhero scripts and stories while I was in the classroom working with the children. These data were both handwritten and audio recorded while children were naturally engaged in superhero play within the context of their classroom. The narratives were collected during two different time periods within the same rural Northern California preschool and with two different groups of children. Data were collected on the first group of children for a total of four months and on the second group for a total of eight months.

Within the initial data collection, I archived and reviewed forty-seven narrative superhero scripts and stories. They had been documented by the children’s afternoon teachers over a four month period and were stored on an electronic file. In the latter part of the narrative data collection, fifty-six narrative superhero scripts collected over an eight month period were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for further data analysis. I collected these narrative scripts using an audio recorder and handwritten field notes while children were naturally engaged within the context of
play. As I was an assistant within this morning classroom, I was with the children each day, but I only collected data when the children engaged in superhero narrative scripts that were natural and self-initiated.

Based on both parts of the narrative script and story data collection, a total of one hundred and three narrative superhero scripts were collected from twenty-one participants’ age 3.2-years old to 5.3-years old over a total of twelve months. These narratives were transcribed, coded based on themes from the literature review, and analyzed based on content to find the results of the most frequently occurring themes that children addressed while engaging in and narrating superhero play within the context of their naturalistic superhero play behavior.

In addition to the collection of narrative superhero scripts and stories, I selected a group of five preschool children from the latter part of the narrative study to be interviewed based on their interest and engagement in superhero play. The interviews took place within their classroom when it was not in use for instructional purposes. The interviews took place over a three week period during which I interviewed each of the selected children once using an open interview guide. During the interviews, I asked the children a total of fifteen questions. (See Appendix A for the interview questions.) I recorded the responses using a digital audio recorder and handwritten field notes. During the interviews, I showed the interview participants pictures of children who were participants in the initial narrative study and who were engaged in superhero play. The children in the photos were not part of the interview participants’ classroom. The children who participated
in the interviews were asked questions about what they thought the children in the pictures were doing and general questions about superhero and associated play. This was done in order to ask purposeful questions about the underlying meanings and themes that children address while engaged in superhero play. These interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for content based on the same themes addressed in the narrative superhero scripts and stories.

For all data collected as part of this study, I developed charts as a way to organize and interpret them. The first two charts were broken down based on the two parts of the narrative data collection which were each composed of two sections. I placed the transcribed data on the right-hand section of the chart and the participants’ pseudonyms and relevant codes for each transcription on the left-hand side. A similar chart was created for the interviews: on the right were the transcribed responses to the questions and on the left were the participants’ pseudonyms and relevant codes for each transcription. As previously mentioned, the codes were developed based upon the content found within the literature review. A content analysis of the results will be presented in Chapter Five in which I used a frequency count of occurrence in order to see the patterns and themes that emerged while the children were naturally engaged in and narrating superhero play within the context of the classrooms as a way to further deepen the understanding of this area of play.

Conclusion

A total of one hundred and three narrative superhero scripts and stories were collected from twenty-one participants ages 3.2-years to 5.3-years old over a total of
twelve months. In addition, seventy-five interview data responses of five selected preschool children ages 4.2-years to 5.3-years-old were collected, transcribed, and coded over a period of three weeks. All of these data were compiled to be coded, frequency counted, and analyzed based on percentages of thematic content in accordance with the literature in order to understand the underlying meanings and themes participants addressed while engaged in narrating superhero play within the context of their naturalistic play behavior within their own classrooms.

The following chapter will present the results obtained from the content analysis of themes addressed based on children’s narrative superhero scripts, stories, and interview responses.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the results obtained from the content analysis of the themes that the participants addressed in their engagement in narrative superhero scripts, stories, and interview responses. The results will be depicted using percentages of the frequencies of themes found in the content analysis. I will present these results in three sections. The first section will illustrate the thematic results of both the afternoon and morning preschool classrooms in which the data were collected, followed by the total narrative thematic results for all narrative superhero scripts and stories. The second section will depict the thematic results of the interviews with the participants. The third section will illustrate the thematic results of both the narrative superhero scripts of the participants as well as the interview results categorized by the participants’ gender which was done to see if there is a difference between the themes that females and males address while engaging in and narrating superhero play.

Narrative Superhero Scripts and Stories Results

In this section I will present the results of the themes addressed within the participants’ engagement in narrative superhero scripts and stories. The results will be organized into three components. The first component illustrates the thematic content results of the narrative superhero scripts and stories of the afternoon class
The second component illustrates the thematic content results of the narrative superhero scripts and stories of the morning class. The last component illustrates the total thematic content results of the narrative superhero scripts and stories from both classes. The results will be depicted using percentage frequencies that illustrate the thematic content that was addressed while participants were engaged in and narrating superhero play. I coded and analyzed the children’s narrative superhero scripts and stories based on the same themes.

The prominent themes found within the narrative superhero scripts of the afternoon class (as illustrated in Figure 4.1 below) included references to prosocial behaviors, moral domain, media, and power themes. The theme of power was broken into subcategories that include fantasy power and personal power.

Less prominent thematic content found within Figure 4.1 included references to affect, fantasy versus reality, rough-and-tumble play, social affiliation, aggression, and weapons play.
Casey, age 4 years and 9 months, narrated, “Batman and Robin save the day and help all the people because they are good guys; that’s their job to help.” This is an example of both a reference to media as well as a prosocial theme. An example of a prosocial theme which also makes reference to the moral domain was given by Solan, age 4 years and 4 months, who said, “Super Solan is really strong, but he doesn’t use his powers to do bad things or hurt people, he uses his powers for good things and to help and protect people from bad guys.” Jericho, age 4 years and 3 months, provided examples of fantasy power, media, and social affiliation working together with his superhero story:

Supergirl saved the day and then she flew over there and she flew so fast around she looked like a tornado flying around. She’s no lady she’s a college
girl. And then she flew over to Metropolis and then she looked inside the window and she saw Clark Kent, and when she got there she was turning into Linda. And then the building shook and then they changed into their superhero costumes and opened the windows and flew out and no one was looking. And then Supergirl and Superman they stopped the earthquake. And you know what was making the earthquake? The powerball that came from Supergirl’s planet. She started out under the water. Then Superman’s crystal that his father gave him when he was a baby he started out in outer space on a planet called Krypton. But I don’t know what Supergirl’s planet is called.

Prominent themes found within the narrative superhero scripts of the morning class include references to power which are broken down into subcategories that include fantasy power and personal power, prosocial interactions, and the moral domain.

An example of fantasy power and prosocial references is illustrated by the narrative script of Koda, age 4 years and 8 months, “Hey, don’t hurt nature. I am superdeer. I am a superhero that helps to take care of everything in nature. I am trying to rescue and protect the animals when they are sick and hurt. I protect animals and nature, please don’t hurt them.” Another example of media, fantasy power, prosocial and moral references was given by Koda who said, “I’m underdog. I am a superhero that has special powers that turns people white and he can fly too. But I only turn bad people white so that they don’t steal my powers and my vitamins. I am a good guy, I help good people.” Sage, age 4 years and 3 months, joins in with
his demonstration of fantasy power in this narrative script, “Ya. Mine is a super
horse too. It’s a bat man horse though and it can fly around.” Sabel, age 3 years and
7 months, signifies more of a personal power in her script, “This is a super girl dress.
It gives me special power and no one can get me. Watch me twirl. I live in this super
house that I built and it protects me too, no one can get me in here.”

The following illustration of prosocial and moral domain references was
given in the narrative script of Koda who stated, “I can transform into anything that I
need to, to help the people. I don’t really like to hurt the bad guys. If they’re really
bad then I try to be superman so that I can teach them to be good.” Koda gave
another example of moral reasoning in this script, “I’m a superhero train and I fight
other trains. Some probably will help and some hurt, some are good train
superheroes and some are bad superhero trains. I know that sometimes superheroes
fight with the bad guys instead of use their words to talk about it.”

Nico, age 3 years and nine months, gave an example to the themes of media,
moral domain, and prosocial references in his narrative superhero script, stating,
“We are good guy transformers. We need to protect ourselves and all the people.
Quick lets find the bad guys and get them, we need to protect ourselves to be safe.
The good guys win over the bad guys.” Sabel gave another example of prosocial
references and fantasy power in this script, “I’m a superhero and I can save the day
and save the people. I transform into a hero with this dress and I can rescue people,
I’m a good hero like a real hero.”
Results of the content analysis of the morning class’s narrative superhero scripts are illustrated below in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2. Morning class narrative superhero script results.

Less prominent thematic content found within the narrative superhero scripts of the morning class included references to rough-and-tumble play, affect, aggression, fantasy versus reality, weapons play, social affiliation, and the media.

Koda gave an example of affective references of feelings of happiness and bravery, fantasy and personal power, as well as reference to fantasy versus reality in relation to real community heroes, saying, “This shot is magic so I turn into a superhero and I don’t have to be afraid anymore and I will be a happy and brave superhero, like a real hero like a policeman.” Sabel gave an example of social affiliation working together and friendship, as well as prosocial and moral
references, stating, “Let’s be superheroes together; we can be superhero friends. We can work together and help people together. We can be good guys and get the bad guys!” Sage gave an example of a narrative script that has the theme of aggression and weapons play, saying “My swords are super strong that they can kill blood.”

Prominent themes found within the total results of the participants’ engagement in narrative superhero scripts included references to power which are broken into subcategories that include fantasy power and personal power, prosocial behaviors, moral domain, and the media.

Isaiah, age 4 years 4 months, gave an example of both fantasy and personal power in this script, “I lost my powers the bad guys took them. You have to sneak into the bad guys and get the vitamins so I can get my powers back, they live over there. Ow, I got hurt trying to get them back. I’ll be okay because I have my powers back so it will take the hurt away.” Sage gave an example of fantasy power and prosocial behavior in this narrative, “There is danger around here. We need to stay safe. I can help keep everyone safe because I am super bull.” Cade, age 4 years and 7 months, provided a window into the themes of media and the moral domain as he stated, “I am a Jedi master and I never die. I’m a good guy not a bad guy.”

Less prominent thematic content found within the results of the narrative superhero scripts included references to rough-and-tumble play, affect, fantasy versus reality, social affiliation, aggression, and weapons play.

Koda gave an example of the theme of fantasy versus reality as well as fantasy power in this script, “I am a superhero and this block gives me all the special
powers. I can stick my hand in here and it makes me turn into whatever I want to so I can save people. Then I can turn back into myself when I want to.” Sage gave an example of weapons play among other themes in this script, stating, “The bad guys got me. I think they got God’s heart too. I’ll have to rescue him; I’m a robot and I have this sword that help people that is attached to me and never comes off.”

Matthew, age 4 years and 9 months, gave an example of aggression and the media when he stated, “I am Batman and I just cut off your head.” Sage gave another example of weapons play and aggression as he said, “My swords are super strong that they can kill blood.” The total narrative superhero script and story results are illustrated below in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3. Total results of narrative superhero scripts
In this section, the results of the content analysis of themes addressed within the participants’ engagement in narrative superhero scripts and stories were presented. These results were organized into three components which included the narrative superhero scripts of the afternoon class, the narrative superhero scripts of the morning class, and the narrative superhero scripts from both classes. The results were depicted in Figures 4.1 through 4.3 using percentage frequencies that illustrated the thematic content that was addressed while participants were engaged in and narrating superhero play. The next section will depict the results of the participant’s interview responses.

**Interview Results**

In this section, I will present the results of the participants’ interview responses based on interest in engagement in superhero play. The interview responses were coded and analyzed based on the same thematic content that was used to analyze the narrative superhero scripts and stories.

Prominent themes found within the interview responses include references to fantasy versus reality that are broken down into subcategories which include responses that superhero play is fantasy, real, or that superheroes are like real community heroes.

An example of reference to fantasy versus reality was given by Abigale, age 4 years and 4 months, who said, “Um, pretend. Because they’re not real, they’re superheroes. Superheroes are only pretend.” Sabel, age 4 years and 2 months, also exemplified that superheroes are pretend: “Pretend. Because they’re not real, they’re
just fake because they’re in the movies, not real in the real life like me like a girl.”

Another example of the fantasy versus reality theme which signified that the children perceived superhero and associated play as fantasy or also related to real community heroes was given by Koda, age 5 years and 3 months, when he stated,

They’re just imagination; they’re just characters. They live in imagination and on TV; they live everywhere in imagination but not in this world, they are just pretend, but not on Earth, because I’ve never seen them in this world. But I know there are real superheroes in the world like police and firefighters and people that rescue and help people; all of that stuff like that.

Koda gave an example of superhero play being fantasy play, saying, “They’re [the kids playing superheroes] just pretending. Because they’re regular humans and humans don’t have superpowers like monsters or superheroes, they are just pretending they have superpowers so they can play the games.” In accordance, Ava, age 4 years and 5 months, described how superhero play is fantasy, “No, I think they are only pretending. Because they’re just kids… they’re playing and superheroes aren’t for reals. I think they’re only pretending like they have superpowers, yeah. Sometimes I pretend to have superpowers and save people and stuff.” Sage, age 4 years and 10 months, referred to superheroes as being real in this response: “Um, real. Because I just know. I see them on movies sometimes and they live in the world.”

The next major theme includes affective references which were further broken down into subcategories that include references to feelings of happiness,
bravery, uncertainty, and sadness. A reference to the feeling of happiness is exemplified by Ava who said, “Good. It feels good, and funny too, it’s funny and fun too. We laugh a lot, I feel happy to play superheroes with my cousin.” Reference to the feeling of bravery is exemplified by Sage who stated:

I like it to play. I’m afraid of the dark, I don’t like being in the dark in my bed alone. Sometime my Mom puts a light on for me and leaves my door open. When I be Batman I don’t feel afraid as much, I feel like I don’t need to be scared of the dark when I be Batman because Batman isn’t afraid, bats live in the dark. I think they do.

Koda gave another example of affective bravery and happiness when he said:

I feel like I’m a real kinda superhero. I feel sort of like I’m powerful and brave and strong and stuff, I can do lots of stuff, like I’m actually not a regular kid, I am special and can do powerful things like Underdog and Spiderman, they’re my favorite. I like all the superheroes because they do good things and help. I smile every time, it makes me feel happy, its fun to play superheroes.

A reference to the feelings of sadness, happiness, and uncertainty is exemplified by Sabel who said, “I feel sad when we play when the bad guys win or someone gets hurt; but sometimes I feel happy when it’s fun. I feel sad because sometimes my cousins play too rough, it is sad if I get hurt.”

The next prominent theme is power which is broken into subcategories of fantasy power and personal power. Sage provided an example of personal power, “I
think I am strong and feel brave. I think I am brave when I be a superhero.” Ava
gave an example of fantasy power when she said, “I think it’s good, it’s fun. I think
it’s magic, it feels like I’m magic to have superpowers like a superhero to do
anything.” Another example of fantasy power was exemplified by Sage who said,

We pretend we have a special car, I forget what she calls it and we go special
places, oh ya, it’s a bat mobile I think it is. Sometimes we have missions to
help people when they’re in trouble. Sometimes I pretend to fly but I can’t
really, only a little bit if I jump high.

Abigale, 4 years and 4 months, described both a fantasy and personal power
when she said, “I be like Superwoman sometimes and have powers that make me do
special things. My powers make me strong; I, um, I can do things sometimes I can. I
like it; it is fun to play and be superpower and help like a superhero girl.”

The children made references to social affiliation which is further broken
down into playing superheroes with family, working together to play superheroes,
playing superheroes games, and playing superheroes with friends. Working together
to play superheroes and playing superheroes with family are exemplified by Sage’s
statement, “I like to play Batman and Batgirl with my sister. That’s the only game I
know. Then we also do stuff to help our family in the house, we pretend we are like
superheroes that help the family.” Ava provided another example of working
together with family, saying “He helps me too sometimes. We do that sometimes,
we work together on the same team and stuff, I like my cousin because he is funny
and we are good superheroes who help people from the goblin.” Another example of playing superheroes with friends and family was exemplified by Abigale, who stated,

I like to be a girl superhero; a superhero girl. Sometimes I play with my brother. He’s Superman and I’m Supergirl. We pretend we can fly and um we do things and help if something happens wrong or bad we help. Probably I play with Ellie sometimes too, we are both girls, we play either Superwoman or Supergirl.

Koda described the social affiliation of working together as friends to play superhero games in this response:

Well, we pretend there are good guys and there are bad guys. Three of us are good guys and there is one kid who is the bad guy. We pretend to hurt each other but not really so that the good guys can win; three kids are more than one kid so we work together to protect people so the bad guy won’t hurt them. So that make four, yeah, there is four of us who play sometimes.

Another prominent theme is that of prosocial references. Sabel explained the prosocial behaviors of superheroes: “Help. The superheroes always save the people. They rescue the people, that’s what we do in the game and superheroes protect all the people and I think animals too. I try to help when I play and stuff like the superheroes do.” Koda also talked about the prosocial behaviors of superheroes, stating,

[They] help people all the time. Well, they use their superpowers to get the bad guys. They rescue the people and help protect people if they are scared;
they protect the whole world all the time. Sometimes they can get a little hurt too, but they heal from their heart and they do it really fast.

Ava stated, “Help, superheroes always help. It’s like their job or something. They always help people and people don’t have to be scared of the bad guys and bad things.” Abigale provided another example into the prosocial behaviors of superheroes, saying,

Um, help; superheroes only hurt bad guys that are in this world, they help the people because they save the day. If the bad guys in the world that do things the superheroes has to save the people and the world to help them and protect the world from the bad guys. But there probably is no bad guys or superheroes in this world, but you can buy to stuff about superheroes at the store.

The last major theme was that of the moral domain. An example of this moral domain was given by Koda when he said,

Well, superheroes are good mostly good, but there are some superheroes that turn into bad guys that try to hurt people. They’re not nice. Most of the characters that I know are good though, but some are bad, the good guys have to help them be good again. They are mostly good because they are good guys in their heart. It covers their hearts to be good so he does good things, its all over in his DNA all around him he’s good; the good protects him like a shield so he won’t get hurt by bad. Sometimes they’re bad if their love isn’t around them and they turn bad and then they have to turn back to good again
and they do, they always do because they are love and have superpowers to protect them.

Sage gave another example of the prosocial and moral domain in relation to real community heroes, stating,

They are good heroes, superheroes are good; they are like police and firefighters; they do good and protect people and rescue when something is happening and that’s what they do. Because superheroes are good, not bad. Bad guys are bad and superheroes get the bad guys so they don’t hurt and stuff and get people.

Sabel provided another window into the moral domain, stating, “Good. Because they’re really good and they have magic powers all the time, well their superpower; they’re the helper people that’s how I know they’re good.”

Ava gave an example of a prosocial and moral domain when she said,

Good, ya, ya. Superheroes are good. Because they rescue people and save them and save the day from the bad guy and help people and things feel brave like not scared of things, bad guys and stuff; they do good things and rescue, we do in the game too; I feel brave too when I am Batgirl and pink and stuff.

The results of the interview responses are illustrated below in Figure 4.4 which depicts the percentage frequencies of the thematic content found in the responses.
Less prominent thematic content found within the interview responses include references to aggression, weapons play, rough-and-tumble play, and the media. Koda’s response provided an example of media and rough-and-tumble play among other themes as he states,

We play all the characters but mostly Underdog, Batman and Robin, Spiderman and Superman. My little brother plays with us too, but sometimes he’s too little because he actually tries to hurt us by pinching or touching us, so I know that he is too little to play. We don’t really hurt each other, we just pretend and move our bodies we don’t actually touch each other, or we touch really lightly; it’s really happy fun we have to defend our selves and protect
too, but not for real, but I have to teach my brother how to be light and not really hurt. Here I’ll show you what we do (gets up and starts demonstrating his body movements).

In Sabel’s interview response, she gave an example of weapons play, aggression, rough-and-tumble, as well as social affiliation when she stated,

I fight off the bad guys with my one big giant sword. It isn’t a real sword though, I got it for Christmas, it’s just a play sword. We mostly don’t really get hurt though; it’s just a game we like to play sometimes. I like it when we wrestle. But sometimes I get hurt for real, and I don’t like it much not really.

In this section I presented the results of the participants’ interview responses based on interest in engagement in superhero play. The interview responses were coded and analyzed based on the same thematic content that was used to analyze the narrative superhero scripts and stories. These results were illustrated in Figure 4.4 and were depicted using percentage frequencies of participant’s responses based on thematic content. The next section will depict the results of both the participant’s narrative superhero scripts and interview responses based on the gender of the participants.

**Gender Differences**

In this section, I will present the results in terms of gender differences using the analysis of the same thematic content that was used the latter results. I do this to see if there is a difference in the themes that the participants address based on their gender.
I found several prominent themes when I analyzed the girls’ narrative superhero scripts including prosocial behaviors, power which is further broken down into fantasy power and personal power, and references to the moral domain.

Less prominent thematic content included rough-and-tumble play, affect, weapons play, fantasy versus reality, aggression, media, and social affiliation. These results are presented in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5. Girls’ narrative superhero script results

Within the girls’ interview responses, I found several prominent themes including references to affect which I have further broken down into feelings of happiness, bravery, sadness, and uncertainty. Another prominent response was that of fantasy versus reality which I have broken down into references to superhero play as being fantasy, references to superhero play as being real, or related to real
community heroes. The girls’ talked about power which I have broken into fantasy power and personal power. Finally, the girls’ spoke of social affiliation which I have broken into working together to play superheroes, playing superheroes with family, playing superhero games, and playing superheroes with friends.

Less prominent themes among the girls’ responses were references of aggression, weapons play, rough-and-tumble play, the media, the moral domain, and prosocial behaviors. These results are presented in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7. Girls’ interview response results

I found several prominent themes in the boys’ narrative superhero scripts including references to power which is further broken down into fantasy power and personal power, prosocial behaviors, the moral domain, and the media.
Less prominent themes found within the boys’ narrative scripts included weapons play, rough-and-tumble play, affect, fantasy versus reality, social affiliation, and aggression. The results are presented in Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6. Boys’ narrative superhero script results

Among the prominent themes I found in the boys’ interview responses results were references to fantasy versus reality which I have broken into superhero play as being fantasy, related to real community heroes, and being representative of reality. The boys’ also made reference to prosocial behaviors, the moral domain, and power which I broke into subcategories of fantasy power and personal power. They also made references to affect which I further broke into feeling of happiness, bravery, sadness, and uncertainty. Finally, the boys’ interviews included references to social
affiliation which I broke playing superheroes with family, playing superheroes with friends, working together to play superheroes, and playing superhero games.

Among the themes that were less prominent in boys’ interviews were references to aggression, weapons play, the media, and rough-and-tumble play.

Figure 4.8 presents the prominent and less prominent results of the boys’ interviews.

Figure 4.8. Boys’ interview response results

In this chapter, I presented the results of the content analysis of the themes that children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play. These results were illustrated using percentage frequencies of thematic content, which were displayed in figures as well as textual information and examples. The results were broken down into three major sections: narrative superhero script and story results,
interview response results, and gender results. The same thematic content was used to analyze all three sections. In the next chapter I will analyze the results.
CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyze the results illustrated in Chapter Four. The analysis will be presented in three sections in accordance with the results. In the first section, I offer an analysis of the results of the total narrative superhero scripts and stories, then I analyze the results of the interviews with the participants, followed by an analysis of the results of both the narrative superhero scripts of the participants as well as the interview results categorized by the participants’ gender.

Analysis of Narrative Superhero Scripts and Stories Results

In this section, I analyze the results of themes addressed within the participants’ engagement in narrative superhero scripts and stories. For purposes of the analysis, I have interpreted the results of the narrative scripts and stories as a whole in order to understand the themes that were addressed in their totality. I will distinguish between the morning and the afternoon class only when there are major differences in the results of each class.

In the analysis of the narrative superhero scripts of the afternoon class, the themes that were most often addressed while children were engaged and narrating superhero play were prosocial, moral, media, and power themes. In the analysis of the results of the morning class, the same themes became dominant in their narrative scripts in stories, although in a different order. For the morning class the themes that
were most often addressed while children were engaged in and narrating superhero play were the themes of power, both fantasy and personal, prosocial behaviors, and that of the moral domain. A major theme which was addressed within the scripts and stories of the afternoon class, which was not addressed within the morning class, was the theme of media, which includes references to media superhero characters.

Taking these results into consideration, it seems that for these children, the theme of prosocial actions and behaviors found within their engagement in and narration of superhero play suggests the identification of superheroes to prosocial behaviors or interactions that are constructive and beneficial, demonstrating their capacity to want to help, share, show concern, defend, protect, or rescue others. In many of their scripts and stories, the children illustrated the capacity that superheroes have to help, protect, and rescue the innocent, identifying their ability to save the day. Many of the children seemed to identify with superheroes prosocially through their play, wanting to help, defend, protect, and rescue in the same manner as superheroes do. This signifies that superheroes may have a constructive and positive effect on the themes that these children addressed through their play. This could be due to the fact that superheroes are, as in the root of the word, heroes of some sort that have superpowers. This relationship to heroes is evident as some of the children made reference to the relationship between heroes of the community such as police officers and firefighters, to that of superheroes. These children may also address the prosocial themes because of their innate tendencies to want to help others, perhaps identifying the role of superheroes as one that helps others as well.
This prosocial theme was often coupled with another major theme, that of the moral domain. Many children made references in their scripts and stories to issues of the wellbeing of others, such as fairness, justice, and rights which were often focused on dichotomies such as good or bad and right or wrong. For these children moral values were very much a part of their engagement in and narration of superhero play. On several occasions there were references to what was right and good, versus what was wrong and bad which children clearly identified in black and white. This could be due to the fact that for many children of this age, dichotomous thinking that accompanies binary opposites is easily understandable as the children learn to decipher the world. The moral domain found within superhero play fits well into this way of thinking because for many of the children, it represents a clear understanding of what is good and bad/right and wrong that children can more easily apply to their play scripts. Also, children of this age tend to base many of their moral judgments around issues of fairness and harm. These children who were engaged in superhero play seemed to clearly identify between those they perceived to be the good guys and the bad guys, and they focused on acting prosocially to do good. They sometimes made reference to getting the bad guys, rarely identifying violence or aggression, but clearly to help, protect, or defend other innocent people or animals. It was as if they condoned the sometimes violent behaviors of superheroes because they were good guys who were only trying to do the right thing by acting prosocially, protecting others from harm or unfairness, so their actions were morally acceptable.
The last major theme found with the analysis of the results was the theme of power which was used to identify references within the narrative superhero scripts and stories that had to do with autonomy and initiative and having control, power, strength, or superpower. I divided the theme of power into fantasy power and personal power. For the children in the afternoon, having fantasy power accounted for the total percentage of references to the theme of power, while, for the children in the morning class, their scripts and stories included references of both fantasy power and personal power. I believe power was a major theme for these children because it is something of which they have little in their own lives. Young children are constantly told how to behave by their parents, teachers, and society as a whole. This often leaves little choice and room for children to decide things on their own. Therefore, it is no surprise that children seek to establish power through their play. Superhero play provides a window through which to exercise this power, as many of the characters and themes are powerful and super. Also, children of this age are leaving the stage of autonomy, the ability to separate and individualize their thinking, and working to establish initiative over their lives through choosing and having control over their play and ideas. This concept of power can be understood through their superhero play because it provides a context through which children can practice exercising their initiative and control over their play and within their lives. Through their engagement in and narration of superhero play, these children were able to build power scripts and ideas about their play, establishing fantasy and
super power, as well as personal power relevant to their lives outside of the play scripts.

A major theme which was addressed through the engagement in and narration of superhero play of the afternoon class, which was not addressed in the morning class was the theme of the media. In many of the scripts and stories of the afternoon class, the children often used names of superhero characters that were either identified on television or through toys. This was not the case for the morning class, as many of their scripts and stories included fictional characters that became superheroes out of their play with traditional toys and materials, instead of from identification of characters in the media. This could be simply due the fact that the children in the afternoon were exposed to more superhero media characters than the children in the morning. It could also be because the children in the afternoon identified more with the superhero characters in the media than the children in the morning class did.

Less prominent thematic content found within the analysis of the narrative superhero scripts and stories of both classes were references to the themes of rough-and-tumble, affect, aggression, fantasy versus reality, weapons play, and social affiliation.

It could be that the theme of rough-and-tumble, also known as contact play or play fighting, did not present itself often because of the context of the play. I collected the children’s narrative scripts and stories while they were engaged in superhero play through materials in the classroom, either independently or with
others. It could be that the context for rough-and-tumble had not been established because they were in the classroom and were aware of the distinct times and places to engage in rough-and-tumble behaviors.

The theme of affective feelings or emotions did not present itself often in the narrative superhero scripts and stories. This could be due to the fact that the narratives were collected in a manner designed to take the adult out of the script, collecting only the children’s naturalistic scripts and stories. As children were narrating, they would use materials and ideas to create a fantasy world which did not often make reference to how they were feeling emotionally. If an adult had interjected with more questions as to how they might be feeling, themes of affective emotions may have surfaced more frequently.

This may also be the case for the themes of the dichotomous deciphering of fantasy versus reality found in superhero play and the themes of social affiliation. These were less prominent themes within the scripts and stories, but if an adult had interjected in the play to ask questions pertaining to fantasy versus reality and relationships based on social affiliation, such themes may have been more evident. This is because as the children were narrating their play scripts, they were often short, and resembled stream of consciousness thinking. The children did not stop their scripts often to decipher between fantasy and reality or to establish the belief that superheroes and associated play are pretend, real, or related to real community heroes. Likewise, the children did not make reference to their ideas of social affiliation relationships which includes working or playing together with family and
friends or as a game very often. Had an adult cued these conversations, the themes may have transpired more frequently.

Other themes that were not addressed very frequently in the narrative superhero scripts and stories of the children were the themes of aggression which also includes a reference to violence or harm, and weapons play which includes using material to make pretend weapons or playing with pretend weapons. These themes, which both have an unconstructive connotation associated with them, are not often socially acceptable behaviors. It may be that due to the context of the school, the children did not address these themes very frequently simply because they were at school and did not associate these types of behaviors with being at school.

In this section, I discussed the content analysis of the themes that children address as a whole through their engagement in and narration of superhero play illustrated through the results their narrative superhero scripts and stories. In the next section, I will analyze the content found within the interview results.

*Analysis of Interviews Results*

In this section I will analyze the results found within the content analysis of the participants’ interview responses. Although the themes used to analyze both the narrative scripts and the interviews were the same, the themes most addressed during the interviews were different than those found within their narratives. I believe this is mostly due to the questions which were asked that allowed me to probe for slightly different responses than were depicted through the children’s naturalistic play.
Prominent themes found within the analysis of the interview responses include references to fantasy versus reality, affective feelings, power, social affiliation, prosocial behaviors, and the moral domain. The ways in which the children deciphered fantasy versus reality were broken down into subcategories which are depicted in order of occurrence: responses that superhero play or superheroes themselves are pretend or fantasy, the belief that superheroes are like real community heroes, and the belief that superhero and associated play is real.

During the interviews, I asked several questions that centered upon the children’s beliefs of what they thought might be happening in the pictures, or what they believed about superheroes and associated play (as shown in Appendix A). This was done in order to acquire an understanding into their thought processes. The intent was to be able to ask specific questions to help clarify what the children actually thought about the fantasy and reality construct associated with superhero play. Did they think superheroes were real, or could they decipher between fantasy and reality?

Thus, many of responses centered on their beliefs of superheroes and associated play as either being fantasy or reality, or related to real community heroes. As previously mentioned, most children did in fact associate superheroes and superhero play as being fantasy and pretend which provides evidence that these children could decipher between fantasy and reality. There were brief mentions of superheroes being related to real community heroes, I believe because of the root of hero, one who helps, protects, or rescues. This was a way for children to represent a relationship between their ideas of superheroes and their observations of the world.
There was only one response that superheroes were real; perhaps for this child, the deciphering between fantasy and reality has not developed yet, or the child simply believed that superheroes are real.

As some of the interview questions pertained to how the children might be feeling, or how they believe others might be feeling while engaged in superhero play, the next major theme found within the analysis or the results was that of affective feelings. This was further broken down into subcategories that include references to feelings of happiness, bravery, uncertainty, and sadness. During the interviews, the children expressed the affective feelings of happiness the most, feelings of bravery next, and feelings of uncertainty or sadness the least within their responses. Perhaps the feeling of happiness was addressed the most because superhero play is just that, play. For these children it seemed to be a playful, enjoyable activity in which they engaged, and therefore, they were able to express their feelings of happiness. Also, when the children were asked about what they thought other children who engaged in superhero play might be feeling, they also expressed the feelings of happiness. The children often used the facial expressions of the children in the pictures, such as the smiles on the children’s faces, to identify a particular affect of happiness. The feeling of bravery was also frequently mentioned, I believe due to the relationship with the power theme that often accompanies superhero play. Power that seems to be associated with superhero play, both fantasy and personal, helps to provide these children with a sense of bravery and strength, a feeling that they do not have to be afraid, which may give these children a sense of power, either within themselves, or
a fantasy power, which may lead to the affective feeling of bravery within these children. Superheroes are often associated with being strong, brave, and powerful; thus, when children narrate superhero play through their scripts and stories, perhaps they identify with these same affects. The last affective feelings of sadness and uncertainty were mentioned very briefly only by one child. It seems that for this child, engaging in superhero play was associated with playing with older male cousins who sometimes were a little too rough. This seemed to bring about the expressions of sadness and uncertainty about the play episodes for this particular child. I also originally included a subcategory of anger within the affective emotions, but not one response was coded as such.

Another theme which was often addressed during the interviews was that of power which had to do with the expression of autonomy, initiative, strength, or superpower. This was a prominent theme both within the interviews and the narrative scripts. Just as found within the analysis of the narrative scripts, references to having fantasy power accounted for most of the responses, while references to having personal power accounted for fewer responses. As previously mentioned, engaging in superhero play may provide a sense of power and control, an outlet for these children to develop and practice initiative through their play. It may enable these children a safe context though which to exercise both fantasy and personal power within their play episodes and within their real life. These children seemed to want to establish a sense of power, and superhero play may provide a context through which to do so. Again, this power was also associated with affective feeling
of bravery for many of these children. Establishing this sense of power through their superhero play enabled some of these children to express their feelings of bravery.

During the interviews, the children described how playing superheroes was a social activity for them, which accounted for the many references to social affiliation. These references were further broken down in the order in which they are described here: playing superheroes with family, working together to play superheroes, playing superheroes games, and playing superheroes with friends. In some of the questions, the children were asked with whom they liked to play superheroes, which probed the responses of social affiliation. For several of the children, engaging in superhero play was a social activity that they engaged in with their family and friends, playing and working together. This is most likely due to the fact that it is play which resembles a game and a social activity for these children. This could also be related to fact that the affective feeling of happiness was the most frequent feeling that was addressed. Thus, playing social superhero games with family and friends seemed to be a fun, enjoyable activity for the majority of these children.

In accordance with the analysis of the narrative superhero scripts and stories, the last major themes addressed during the interviews were references to prosocial and moral values and behaviors. During the interviews, the children often expressed how superheroes help, protect, and defend others, often to do good over bad. The children also expressed that when they play superheroes they try to do the same
which again demonstrates the constructive and beneficial nature that the children associate with superhero play.

Less prominent thematic content found within the analysis of the interview responses were the same as some found within narratives, including references to aggression, weapons play, media, and rough-and-tumble play. All of these themes, with the exception of the media, tend to have an unconstructive or even harmful connotation associated with them within society as a whole. Just as found with the narratives, perhaps these themes were not frequently addressed simply due to the fact that the interviews took place within the context of the school, and therefore children did not address these themes in association with behaviors that are acceptable at school.

In this section, I have discussed the analysis of the results for the interview responses. In the next section, I will discuss the analysis of the results of both the participants’ narrative superhero scripts and interview responses based on the gender of the participants.

**Analysis of Gender Results**

In this section, I will review the analysis of the results of both the participants’ narrative superhero scripts and stories and interview responses based on the gender of the participants. This was done in order to see if there is a difference between the themes girls address in their engagement and narration of superhero play versus the themes that boys address in their engagement and narration of superhero play.
When I analyzed the results of the girls’ narrative superhero scripts and stories, I found most of their themes revolved around prosocial behaviors, power, and references to the moral domain, while the fewest number of themes had to do with rough-and-tumble play, affect, weapons play, fantasy versus reality, aggression, media, and social affiliation.

When analyzing the results of the boys’ narrative superhero scripts, I found several of their themes included references to power, prosocial behaviors, the moral domain, and the media with the fewest number of themes dealing with rough-and-tumble play, weapons play, affect, fantasy versus reality, social affiliation, and aggression.

Thus, as the analysis illustrates, the girls and the boys addressed many of the same themes within their narrative superhero scripts and stories, although there were some differences. The themes of prosocial behavior, moral domain, and power were most frequent amongst both the boys and the girls. Both boys and girls addressed fantasy power more, although references to personal power were more frequent among the girls than the boys. I believe this was do to the fact that engaging in superhero play gave the girls a sense of power that was applicable to their personal lives, perhaps making them feel more initiative and powerful through their narration of play episodes. Another similarity between both the girls and the boys were references to the themes that were addressed the least such as rough-and-tumble play, weapons play, affect, fantasy versus reality, social affiliation, and aggression.
These were the same themes that were least addressed throughout all of the narratives, for the same reasons that were previously discussed.

The differences between the themes that girls and boys addressed had to do with the theme of the media. The boys’ addressed the theme of media quite frequently within their narrative superhero scripts and stories, while the girls did not. The boys made references to media characters more frequently than did the girls. This could be due to the possibility that boys watched more television or played with toys more frequently that related to superhero characters. This could also be due to the possibility that the boys may identify with the media characters more so than the girls which was evidenced through their engagement in and narration of superhero play. Perhaps because the majority of media superheroes are male, the boys were more easily able to identify with the characters compared to the girls.

Within the analysis of the girls’ interview response results, I found several major themes which were addressed. These included references to affective emotions, fantasy versus reality, power, and social affiliation. The theme of affective feelings was the most frequent amongst the girls which I have further broken down into the order of which they are most frequently addressed: feelings of happiness, bravery, sadness, and uncertainty. This could be because the girls talked about their feelings more so than the boys did or found it easier to describe the way that they were feeling in comparison to the boys.

Another prominent theme was is that of fantasy versus reality, which for the girls’ was entirely composed of the belief that superhero and associated play were
pretend rather than being real or related to real community heroes. It was as if for
the girls, there was no doubt that superhero play was fantasy play that did not exist in
reality. Perhaps the girls were more able to discern between fantasy and reality. The
girls’ also talked about power quite frequently, addressing both fantasy and personal
power. For these girls, superheroes and associated play was a powerful activity of
play for them which seemed to help them develop a sense of both fantasy power
within their play, as well as a personal power within their lives. Lastly, the girls
addressed the theme of social affiliation quite often which I have broken down into
the order in which they occurred most frequently: working together to play
superheroes, playing superheroes with family, playing superhero games, and playing
superheroes with friends. For these girls, engaging in superhero play seemed like a
fun, enjoyable, and social activity that was partaken in with family and friends.

Less prominent themes found among the girls’ interview response results
were references to aggression, weapons play, rough-and-tumble play, the media, the
moral domain, and prosocial behaviors. The ones that struck me as standing out
distinct from the total interview results were the themes of prosocial behaviors and
the moral domain. In all other areas of analysis these two themes have been
prominent in my findings, except when singling out the girls’ responses. The only
explanation I can think of is in relation to the theme of media. When superheroes are
portrayed in the media, there is always a clear distinction between good and bad,
right and wrong. In these shows, the superheroes are often the characters who are
depicted as helpful and prosocial, who always act morally to do the right thing to
help others. It may be that the girls did not reference these media characters as much because they did not have as much identification with them and therefore did not associate superheroes with prosocial and moral behaviors as others do who may have more experiences with the media. Perhaps for the girls, building prosocial and moral interaction within their play scripts was not as evident because they did not have as much to relate it to outside of their play.

Upon analyzing the results of the boys’ interview responses, I found some similarities and differences between their responses and those of the girls. Among the similarities were references to fantasy versus reality, although the boys did decipher between the subcategories unlike the girls. For the boys, it was not as clearly evident for them that superheroes and related play were fantasy or pretend as it was for the girls. The boys referenced other areas of fantasy versus reality, such as superheroes in relation to real community heroes and representative of reality. It may be that the boys related more to superheroes who are more often male, as well as community heroes that are more often male, and could more easily make the association. Also, for one boy, superheroes were part of reality, signifying an inability to decipher between fantasy and reality.

The theme of power was also a major theme for boys, although for the boys, fantasy power was addressed more frequently than personal power, whereas for the girls both subcategories were addressed equally. This could be because for the boys, engaging in superhero play created a fantasy power they wished they had, rather than personal power that was related to real life. It could also be related to the fact that
the girls were more able to decipher between fantasy and reality and could apply the concept of power along the same lines, accessing a personal power through play that could be applied to their real lives.

The boys also made references to affective feelings like the girls did, but only to the feelings of happiness and bravery, not of sadness or uncertainty as the girls did. This may be because for these boys, superhero play was always associated with play, a fun and enjoyable activity that brought about feelings of happiness and bravery. There was not one mention of any other emotion. Yet, for the girls, this was not always the case. For one girl in particular, due to her play partners, the play sometimes became too rough, and therefore brought about other feelings such as sadness or uncertainty as to how the play made her feel.

Finally, the boys’ interview responses also included references to the same social affiliations as the girls’ responses did, which I broke down in the order in which the most frequently occurred: playing superheroes with family, playing superheroes with friends, working together to play superheroes, and playing superhero games. For both boys and girls, engaging in superhero play was a social activity that was often played with family and friends. Yet, for the girls working together was the most frequently occurring social affiliation, while for the boys it was playing with family. Perhaps for these girls exercising teamwork through their superhero play was a larger part of their play episodes which initiates them working together more often.
Similarities among the themes that were less prominent in boys’ interviews, as occurred with the girls’ interview responses, were references to aggression, weapons play, the media, and rough-and-tumble play. Again, these themes generally have unconstructive or harmful connotation associated with them. Taking the context of the school into consideration, it is evident that these children may have not felt that these themes should be associated with being at school.

When analyzing these results, I found that the major differences between the girls’ and the boys’ interview responses were the themes of prosocial behaviors and the moral domain. These were major themes that were addressed for the boys, both within their narrative superhero scripts and their interview responses. However, for the girls, these were only major themes within their narrative superhero scripts and not their interview responses (although the theme of prosocial behaviors fell just under 10% for the girls’ interview responses). It is possible that the boys associated superhero play more with the themes of prosocial and moral behaviors because they had a more clear idea of what superheroes represented to them, such as being representative of prosocial and moral behaviors. For the girls, this was not as clearly represented in their engagement in and narration of superhero play. The girls may not have had as clear cut a definition that superheroes and associated play were always helpful and good, which portrays that for the girls the dichotomies of harm versus help, or good versus bad were not as black and white as seemed to be the case for the boys. This could also be explained as the girls referenced the affective feelings of sadness and uncertainty more frequently in comparison to the boys.
Conclusion

Overall, the themes that were most addressed as children were engaged in and narrating superhero play were the themes of prosocial behaviors, moral values, power, and the media. These themes were most addressed as children were engaged in naturalistic superhero play behavior, narration, and story dictation. When children were interviewed and asked specific questions regarding their engagement in superhero play, the major themes that emerged were quite different. The themes that were addressed most during the interviews were the themes of fantasy versus reality, affective references, power, social affiliation, prosocial behaviors, and the moral domain.

Thus, the three themes that emerged the most in both areas of data collection were the themes of prosocial behaviors, moral values, and power. The theme of power emerging as a major theme both within children’s narratives and interview responses signifies the developmentally appropriate use of superhero play by these children to exercise autonomy and initiative through their play scripts. The themes of prosocial and moral values are both associated with constructive and valuable connotations which seem to signify the valuably constructive outcomes within children’s engagement in superhero play. Thus, engagement in and narration of superhero play seems to be a beneficial, favorable, and developmentally appropriate activity for this group of children.

The themes that emerged the least as children were engaged in and narrating superhero play were the themes of rough-and-tumble play, weapons play, aggression,
affective references, social affiliation, and fantasy versus reality. When children were asked specific questions during the interviews pertaining to their engagement in superhero play and awareness of superheroes, the least frequently addressed themes were the themes of rough-and-tumble, weapons play, aggression, and the media.

Thus, the themes that overlap as the least addressed themes in both areas of data collection were the themes of rough-and-tumble, weapons play, and aggression. These themes are associated with more unconstructive and perhaps harmful connotations within society as whole. These themes especially, amongst most adults, teachers, and schools are not tolerated and therefore are often looked down upon. For this particular group of children, these themes were not frequently addressed, perhaps because they do not associate these themes with superhero play, or because they are engaging in narration and interviews within the context of school where the children might not associate as a place to engage in these kinds of behaviors. The infrequent mention of these themes coupled with the frequent mention of themes related to prosocial and moral values further supports the previous findings that superhero play seems to be a constructive and valuable activity for these preschool children.

In this chapter I have analyzed my results based on the themes that children address while engaged in narrating superhero play. I have analyzed these results through the collection of naturalistic narrative superhero scripts and stories of the participants; interview responses based on children’s engagement in superhero play and awareness of superheroes themselves, and through an analysis of the themes that
emerged based on the gender of the participants. In the next chapter, I will discuss the conclusions of my research based on the analysis of the results.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the conclusions based on my research. I will also provide recommendations for building on this current study as well as discuss the limitations of this study and implications for future research.

Conclusion

Based on this research, it is safe to conclude that for these particular children, engaging in and narrating in superhero play was a fun, valuable, and constructive activity which helped them to identify and understand important themes relevant to their lives. This is evident as the major themes identified both within the children’s engagement in naturalistic narrative superhero scripts and within their interview response were the themes of prosocial behaviors, moral values, and power. These three major themes addressed in the children’s engagement in and narration of superhero play seem to represent positive and beneficial outcomes on these children’s play behaviors.

The frequent theme of power signifies the developmentally appropriate context that superhero play holds for these children. As preschool children work to establish autonomy and initiative through their play, superhero play scripts may provide a context through which to act out, narrate, and identify with powerful schemas and stories, both on a personal and a fantasy level, which in turn may
stimulate their development. Likewise, the frequent themes of prosocial and moral values and behaviors found within these children’s engagement in and narration of superhero play may signify that the play held constructive and advantageous lessons and values for these children.

The themes that children addressed the least both through their engagement in naturalistic narrative superhero scripts and interview responses were the themes of rough-and-tumble, weapons play, and aggression. Based on this finding, I conclude that for these children engaging in superhero play was not a harmful or unconstructive activity. This is evident as these three themes are often associated with harmful and unconstructive values from many adults such as parents, teachers, and society as a whole. Rough-and-tumble play behavior, weapons play, and aggression are often associated with violence in the minds of many adults which is one of the reasons why superhero play is not allowed in many schools. Many adults fear that engaging in superhero play will lead to these more harmful and unconstructive activities. As this study indicates, this was not the case for this particular group of preschool children. In fact, this study revealed quite the opposite.

Thus, it is my conclusion based on the findings of this study that for these children, engaging in superhero play provided affirmative, constructive, and advantageous outcomes on the play their behaviors which is contiguous to developmentally appropriate practices that are suitable and desired for preschool children. Therefore, these findings suggest that as teachers of preschool children, curriculum development which tries to expand superhero play within the classroom
should be centered upon the themes of prosocial and moral values, as well as opportunities to explore personal and fantasy power.

Limitations to this study include the size of the research sample population. Due to the fact that this study was a microethnographic case study, the size of the sample population was very small. This was a qualitative study meant to provide a window into the perceptions and understandings of superhero play for a particular group of children engaged in naturalistic play. Therefore, the results and conclusions of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. The results and conclusions found in this study can only be understood and applied to the participants.

In order for this current work to be expanded upon, future researchers in the field could collect a larger sample size of narrative superhero scripts and stories while children were engaged in naturalistic play. Using the same themes for coding with larger collection of narratives, researchers may be able to find clearer trends. This would enhance the understanding of the role of superhero play for preschool children and provide results that could be generalized to the larger population. This could also be true of the interviews. If researchers conduct interviews with a larger sample of children, it may provide additional evidence as to the themes children address while engaged in and narrating superhero play, and these results too could be generalized to the larger population.

Implications for further research include a mixed methods approach as a way to triangulate the data. Doing a quantitative study which tries to identify the themes
that preschool children address while engaged in narrating superhero play, in conjunction with a qualitative study which resembles this one may help to deepen the understanding what meaning engagement in superhero play holds for preschool children. Applying a mixed method approach to this current approach, as well as increasing the sample size may help to generalize the findings to a larger population.
APPENDIX A

OPEN INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Hi. You remember me right? I’m your teacher at school, but today I would like to talk to you about something I am doing for one of the classes I take here at college. I want to know some things, and I need your help. Is that okay with you?

Background

How old are you?

What do you like to play with here at your school?

I would like to show you some pictures today and ask you some questions about them.

Overall meanings, themes, understandings of pictures as a whole

What do you think these children are doing in these pictures?

1. Do you think these children are pretend fighting or are the really fighting? **Probe:** How can you tell?

2. What do you think these children are thinking about while they play?

3. Look at the children’s faces. What do you think the children might be feeling?
   **Probe:** How can you tell?
Engagement in play

4. Do you think these children really had superpowers, or were they just pretending?

**Probe:** *How do you know?*

5. How do you feel about playing superhero games?  **If no go to question #12**

6. What kind of superhero games do you like to play?

7. What do you do when you play these games?

8. What superhero characters do you like to play?

9. What kind of superpowers do you have in the games?

10: How do you feel when you play superhero games?

11. What do you think about when you play superhero games?

12. Do you think that superheroes are real or pretend? **Probe:** *How can you tell?*

13. Do you think superheroes are good, bad or something else? **Probe:** *Tell me about why you think so.*

14. Do you think superheroes help people or hurt people? **Probe:** *Tell me about why you think so.*

15. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about superheroes or playing superhero games?
APPENDIX B

CODE BOOK

What themes and meanings are children addressing while engaged in and narrating superhero play?


2. F vs. R- F  Fantasy vs. Reality: deciphering of pretence versus reality; dichotomies: belief that superheroes are pretend, imaginary, or fantasy characters, or that play is just pretend.

   F vs. R- R  Fantasy vs. Reality dichotomous deciphering; belief that superheroes and superhero play is real and happens in real life

   F vs. R- RC Association to real heroes in the community

4. PW  Power: Autonomy/Initiative, having control, power, strength or superpower.

   PW-P  Personal power

   PW-F  Fantasy Power

5. SA  Social Affiliation Construct: friendship, working or playing together

   SA-WT  Social Affiliation-Working Together

   SA-FA  Social Affiliation-Family

   SA-FR  Social Affiliation-Friends

   SA-G  Social Affiliation-Game

6. PRO  Prosocial: action/story that produces positive or beneficial outcome including ability to help, share, show concern, defend, protect, or rescue; belief that superheroes are helpful

7. AGG  Aggression, violence or harm

8. AFF  Affect Construct: emotions, feelings, working through these feelings, issues, or emotions

   AFF-H  Feeling happy/good/like-positive feelings

   AFF-B  Feeling of bravery

   AFF-U  Unsure of feelings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aff-S</th>
<th>Feeling of sadness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. R&amp;T</td>
<td>Rough-and-tumble play behavior, contact play, or play fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. WPS PL</td>
<td>Weapons play; using materials to make weapons or playing with pretend weapons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. MED</td>
<td>Reference to the media or media superhero characters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Books (Original work published 1966).


