

In what ways, if any, is play-based learning incorporated into early literacy skills in a childcare setting?

A Pilot Study Conducted by

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for EDF 625: Qualitative Research

Marshall University

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**Abstract**

This pilot study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers integrating play-based learning and literacy in rural childcare settings. A set of participant observations of classrooms were conducted as well as structured interviews of 2 teachers working in pre-k classrooms. Thematic analysis was conducted, and coding techniques were used to analyze data. Results suggest three primary themes in the data. The first theme, Play-based learning and literacy describes actions you may see and use in the classroom to support them. The second theme, describes how to implement play-based learning and literacy in the classroom with examples from observations in classrooms. Finally, the third theme looks at how the environment influences play-based learning and literacy activities in classrooms. Findings from the pilot study would encourage more classroom observations and interviews with teachers of those rooms observed. It also suggests taking a deeper look at the vocabulary used and including administrators in the process.

## **Introduction**

Early literacy skills have been at the forefront of education lately with neuroscience and new research highlighting phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills. The body of research is called the science of reading. It has been highlighting research from the past 40 years and the National Reading Panel report from 2000. The research is being written into legislation and state standards for kindergarten through high school. However, what happens before children are in school and how does their exposure to concepts of literacy affect their learning? According to Terrill & Watson (2018), approximately one out of four children attend a childcare center before entering kindergarten. Most children attending childcare settings are exposed to play-based learning that allows them to learn through developmentally appropriate practices. However, there has been a decline in play-based learning and an increase in explicit instruction in pre-kindergarten environments. According to Klenk (2001), teachers value play-based literacy but they are not familiar with strategies to increase print in developmentally appropriate ways. Play-based learning or playful learning can be defined as learning content while playing freely, with teacher guidance, or during structured games (Zosh et al. 2022). Early childhood teachers can combine playful learning and rich experiences to support literacy skills in their environments.

Play supports and promotes language learning, vocabulary, and social skills during early childhood (NAEYC 2013). Learning to read is a process that can be developed through play and guidance from adults. Baroody and Diamond (2016), discuss literacy experiences and skills learned through literacy play and how these experiences lay the foundation for later reading achievement. Strauss and Bipath (2020), explore a connection between the alphabet and letter-sound knowledge with a child's ability to speak, read, and write. Phonemic awareness, high-

frequency words, and decoding skills are included in early literacy instruction. The play-based environment should support oral and written foundational skills. Teachers also play a crucial role in integrating literacy with play-based learning. Strauss and Bipath (2020), describe the role of the teacher as integrating play by helping children learn to communicate, and use new information, and concepts. The purpose of this research is to observe and document literacy experiences in play-based learning settings. Early childhood classrooms in childcare and within school buildings offer a variety of experiences with literacy and writing. The literacy experiences are embedded throughout the environment with printed artifacts, photos, routines, and small and large group activities.

### **Literature Review**

Literacy and play go hand in hand in the early years of learning. Children learn language through play-based experiences. Young children love to play with sounds and words. Nursery rhymes, chants, and silly songs are an example of this type of early literacy play. When children enter preschool or pre-k programs, literacy learning starts to focus on phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Roberts (2021) found that short lessons were significant for children to show growth in letter learning. Shared reading experiences have also been shown to increase children's vocabulary and comprehension skills. (Colliver et.al, 2021). Some centers incorporate explicit and systematic instruction of literacy skills. The focus in the early years is phonemic awareness and phonics. Rand and Marrow (2021) recommend integrating play to foster language and literacy skills with a phonics-intensive curriculum. Wohlwend (2023) states that current research recognizes that "play-based learning environments are more effective than direct instruction of targeted skills." Play offers children a low-risk environment to practice and explore language and vocabulary. Play also offers a chance

for children to build comprehension skills through book-related play while using props to retell stories. The children also get exposure to different perspectives while working together to make meaning of the characters and events in the stories (Wohlwend, 2023). Children's early literacy experiences help build a foundation for reading skills.

This research paper is divided into three sections focused on play-based learning, early literacy, and how the two combine to form powerful experiences and build foundations. The current research supports incorporating play-based learning into early childhood classrooms. There is a lot of research focused on classrooms, but I had a hard time finding information on play-based learning in childcare centers with a focus on literacy skills.

### **Play-based Learning**

Play-based learning is an instructional approach that incorporates the interests and ideas of the children with specific learning goals or standards that are facilitated by an adult. Play-based learning can also be described as guided play or purposeful learning. "Purposeful learning happens when teachers have an understanding of both content and play pedagogy to design learning spaces that are interactive, intentional, investigative, personalized to interests and needs, scaffolded to support discovery and connections to prior learning, and aligned to academic goals and standards" (Allee-Herndon and Roberts, 2021, p. 55-56). Purposeful play should support the development of the whole child (Allee-Herndon, 2021). Rand and Marrow (2021) explain how play supports reading development by fostering language skills, vocabulary, oral competence, and functional literacy practices. Children have exhibited literacy behaviors during play-based learning using props and functional literacy objects when the environment is set up to support literacy experiences. Rand and Marrow (2021) describe how children engaged with literacy experiences during play by demonstrating book-handling skills, reading, writing, and integrated

skills into their play sequences. When integrating early literacy practice and play-based learning into classrooms, teachers should create environments that offer rich and authentic experiences with print-rich materials and tools.

## **Early Literacy**

Support for early literacy skills has been at the forefront of education for decades. It is often discussed in three ways. The first is about instruction and materials used for instructions. The second is the interactions between the teacher and students that encourage or model literacy skills. The third is how the environment is set up to encourage involvement in literacy activities. Current research tends to focus on instruction and skills in explicit and systematic instruction. They have been highlighting phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics. Some research also looks at vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills that develop in pre-k classrooms. Research suggests that there is a need for decoding and linguistic comprehension skills and that oral language development can predict later reading comprehension skills (Rand and Marrow, 2021). “Learning to read is incredibly complex, requiring the acquisition of a wide range of skills through a variety of means including exposure, apprenticeship, and direct instruction.” (David et. al, 2020, p. 42)

## **Statement of Problem**

The current research supports integrating literacy with play-based learning. The research has addressed what this looks like in classroom settings and for teachers. However, there is a need for research that focuses on childcare centers and how they integrate literacy with play-based learning in their environments. This pilot study will explore, and test methods meant to help determine how best to study a gap in the literature related to play-based learning and literacy in childcare settings.

## **Methods**

Data collection for this study involved peer-reviewed articles, classroom observations, interviews, and data analysis. This study uses a phenomenological approach. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that qualitative research is ongoing as people engage in and make meaning of activities, experiences, and phenomena. A phenomenology study focuses on the experience itself, the structure of the experience, and interviews. The task of this study is to look at elements of play-based learning and literacy in the classroom and investigate if they integrate.

## **Participants**

The participants in the study are two teachers at a childcare center. They have a Pre-K collaborative classroom with 18 children. The children are 4 and 5-year-olds. Most of the children have attended the full-day program for the school year.

## **Procedures**

I have contacted the assistant director of the childcare center for permission to observe the classroom. I will observe Thursday, June 8, and Friday, June 9, and collect data. I will observe both days 9:30- 10:15. The next step will be to conduct an interview with the lead teacher.

## **Reflexivity/Ethics**

The identity of the children and teachers will be protected and shared with only me and the instructor of EDF 625. The children will only be identified with initials in the observations.

## **Results**

Descriptive and eclectic coding was used for this study when analyzing data. According to Saldana (2013), descriptive coding “assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase

– most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. Provides an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing” (p 262). Eclectic coding is a “purposeful and compatible combination of two more First Cycle coding methods, with the understanding that analytic memo writing and Second Cycles of recording will synthesize the variety and number of codes into a more unified scheme.” (Saldana, 2013, p 262-263) Descriptive coding was used first and then it grew into Eclectic coding the third time around. I chose these types of coding because I used a word cloud to gather the most used words and phrases in each interview and observation. Then I looked at each word and phrase for a purpose and how it relates to the research question. During the last coding period, I looked to see how the theme connected and combined them for the research.

The themes found within this research include play-based learning, literacy, environments, and how they work together to support each other. These themes are broken into actions and implementations. The code book is broken into the following:

- Play-based learning and Literacy: actions you may see and use in the classroom to support them
- HOW- how to implement play-based learning and literacy in the classroom
- Environment- how to use the environment for play-based learning and literacy

Let's take a closer look at the themes and research.

### **Play-based Learning**

Let's begin by defining play-based learning with the interpretations from each teacher that participated in the study. MM described play-based learning as “voluntary engagement in enjoyable activities. It is guided by the children and provides authentic and meaningful experiences.” JJ described it as “Providing children with an environment that allows them to

become engaged and explore with a wide variety of materials, peers, and other resources.”

Throughout this research, some common ideas in play-based learning appeared. Engagement, integration, meaning, conversations, modeling, and play were common thoughts in the interviews and observations. Engagement and play increase conversations during times when the children were in centers. Teachers described how they model, play, and have conversations daily with children. MM described how they discuss “the provocations as a group and then visit it in small groups. After the children have had time to create and work with the materials, we ask questions and encourage the children to write or draw about their experiences.” Play-based learning also integrates all subjects with literacy and math. MM stated that “Once children start playing, integration happens naturally, and projects begin to emerge. Children learn and do not even realize they are learning.”

### **Literacy**

Literacy is woven into the classroom through play experiences and small group work. To integrate it teachers read, write, sing, have conversations, and play games with the children. “At times, the adults in the room may ask open-ended questions to get the children’s brains thinking, or they may offer suggestions in subtle ways to help them make connections to what they already know.” MM JJ stated in her interview that she likes to “provide books, pictures, media, objects, and room for the children.” The teachers defined literacy as helping children develop their vocabulary for communication and the foundational skills necessary to learn to read. They also mentioned that it includes verbal communication, mark-making, and scribbling. They also include literacy in the classroom by using engaging read-alouds, demonstrations of writing, one-on-one conversations, providing an area for dramatic play, a writing center as well as writing tools in all the centers, literacy-related materials in each of the centers, labeled objects

in the room, and a small library area. “We model writing and have conversations throughout the day that can be defined as literacy also. We also include books related to the topics or projects we are working on in the classroom.” MM

### **How**

In the previous sections, we discussed how teachers define play-based learning and literacy. Now we will look at how they implement it in the classroom.

“To develop the children’s literacy learning in the context of the play, I provide opportunities for quality interactions that cultivate spontaneous literacy behaviors. Play in the various learning centers allows the children to apply their prior knowledge as well as gain higher-order thinking skills through playing and engaging with others. When the children are playing, they are using their imagination and imagination is about using symbols; a block can be a telephone. By understanding these symbols, they are using preliteracy skills for reading and writing, as letters are symbols. When the children are interested, they will pick things up easily. When they are motivated by their friends or out of necessity, they will learn things. Literacy is integrated into all topics and modeled throughout the day also.” MM

“All learning centers have books for the children to use. They can practice turning the pages, looking at the pictures, and noticing the letters and words. We read stories as a group where the students participate in the reading in different ways like discussing new vocabulary, “reading” repeating phrases. We participate in movement songs and sing to practice skill like rhyming and alliteration.” JJ

Teachers model activities and connect provocations with interests and ideas. Subjects are integrated into projects, small groups, and centers.

## Environment

The environments play a key role in play-based learning and literacy. The selection of materials is important to foster curiosity, projects, and ideas. The teachers set the stage for learning in the classroom by setting up the environment. “My class is set up for learning through a carefully planned environment filled with different learning centers and open-ended materials.” MM

“I like to use items from nature, small and interesting loose parts, baskets, and things with interesting colors and textures. There are times, though, when I might just have a collection of objects such as a selection of different maps. Along with the materials, I usually include some vocabulary cards or texts that are related to something we are studying, or I might add a prompt for their exploration of the materials.” MM

Materials can be collected throughout the year and placed in centers when the interests arise. “I appreciate materials that can be incorporated into multiple subjects at one time for example, bottle caps can be used for counting in math and then used again to retell stories and create pictures.” JJ I observed children playing with loose parts in a classroom. Three children were sitting on the floor counting ladybugs and drawing numbers. This is the conversation and how they used the materials.

K- “I have 10.”

L- “Look I made a 10. It is a stick and a circle.”

K- “1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ,6, 7, 8, 9, 10...I told you I had 10.”

Play-based learning and literacy integrate into the classroom with planned and unplanned activities. The teachers use a variety of materials to set the stage for learning. The model reading, writing, and conversations daily.

## Discussion

The results of this study have concluded after two observations and two interviews. Throughout this experience, the data supports that play-based learning and literacy work together for children to learn. It also suggests that the environment and the teacher play an important role when implementing these practices in the classroom. These results may have come to fruition because the teachers are experienced and have received professional learning in both areas of education. All the teachers have worked in public pre-k classrooms and childcare settings. They also have experience with Head Start.

The teachers that I interviewed and observed seemed to have a lot in common. All of them discussed the importance of room setup and materials used to foster literacy. The environment is also an important factor, throughout the observations the children were able to function and follow routines in their classrooms. They seemed to understand expectations and show ownership in their classrooms. The classroom was set up with literacy experiences in all centers and the children seemed familiar with all the materials. During my first interview with MM she described her room setup, “My class is set up for learning through a carefully planned environment filled with different learning centers and open-ended materials. The children have ample time for self-chosen, self-directed play. At times, the adults in the room may ask open-ended questions to get the children’s brains thinking, or they may offer suggestions in subtle ways to help them make connections to what they already know. We change materials in the room to match the interests and ideas of the children. Umm and sometimes the children ask to change centers and materials.” I found that after the observations and interviews that this seemed to be how the teachers created their environments to foster learning.

To further this research, I would like to work in other classrooms during the school year and compare universal pre-k settings with childcare settings. I would also like to look deeper into the questions being asked during play with the children and the materials that are added to the environment for literacy learning. I would like to look at the questions being asked and how they are answered for verbal language skills and vocabulary.

I would like to really explore vocabulary and how or if the children use new words they are introduced to for projects. How the vocabulary is introduced and woven into everyday activities. It would also be interesting to see if the vocabulary was used during play-based learning and how is it used by the teachers.

Another thought about this study would be to get teachers that are first-year, five-year, ten-year, and twenty years of experience and compare their thoughts about literacy and play-based learning. It would also help to inventory the materials that they use to encourage literacy in play-based learning and what text they use to support it. This would require more interviews and observations in classrooms. It would also be nice to interview the children and see how they feel about literacy and the materials used in the classroom to support it.

To modify this study, I would interview and observe more teachers. I would also make sure that the research was conducted during the school year and not during summer programming. I would also look at two different groups that would include childcare classrooms and classrooms within schools. I could also possibly add another group with Head Start classrooms. Another possible modification would be to collect information from teachers in different regions of West Virginia and compare. That would also mean more interviews and observations. My ideal plan would be to break the state up into six regions and observe three classrooms in each region. I would also

like to make sure that the interviews coincide with the room observations. I think that would make the interview flow and relate to the project.

The observations and interviews conducted were out of the school year and held within summer programs. I would like to do this during the school year and interview the teachers whose classrooms I observed. SC had a family emergency, and she could not be interviewed within my time frame, so I had to find another teacher. It all worked out but I think the interview would have been better because of being in her classroom and already talking with her.

I would modify my interview schedule by observing in their classrooms first and then setting up interviews. I would also change how I took notes for the interviews and color code as I went through each observation and interview. I would organize my observation notes into columns and include a column for observer comments. I would also make sure that my interviews were in person and not through TEAMS. My second interview was in person, and I felt like I got so much more out of it than meeting over a computer. The research did help me rethink some research questions and it also made me think about more questions that should be added to the interviews. It also made me think about the order of the questions and how they flowed. I did think about putting literacy first but then I changed my mind and kept it the same. I would like to add more questions about centers and small groups so that I could look at the instructions. Another thought I had was to ask for some vocabulary and questions they use or ask their children throughout the day. However, I also feel like that may change the focus of the research and then I would be collecting too much information. I would like to interview and observe more teachers for a larger study. I think it would make the data and coding larger and more stressful, but I also think that the themes and patterns might change. It would be interesting just to see if it

did change the outcomes of the research. I also thought about talking with administrators and interviewing the principals but then again it would change the focus of the study.

### **Class Reflection**

I struggled with this project at first but now my mind is racing with a lot of ideas. This was my first experience with qualitative research, and it was a struggle at times trying to narrow a topic and learn about the steps of qualitative research. I really struggled with coding and validity. I am still struggling with the validity but working with more studies with help me figure this out.

I learned so much about qualitative research and how to create and set up studies. One of my big takeaways was that most qualitative research cannot be repeated because of the emotions and views that are included in the studies. Another huge idea was coding and finding themes within the research. It was confusing at first and I coded my work three times to narrow the focus. It also helped when I made visuals and created word clouds. Another pro was taking the two qualitative research courses together. It helped organize thoughts and look at the processes in different ways. It also became confusing sometimes when they discussed the same concepts. It was also a great idea to look at all the reading and text to see how they meshed. I really liked the coding book. It was long but very helpful when coding for the first time.

Writing research papers are not my favorite but I appreciate the fact that we could ask questions and get quick responses and guidance. I also appreciate the fact that we did the paper step by step and could edit it as we moved on to the next step. It has been a challenge to incorporate sources and code the research to create the paper. However, once I got started it seemed to flow and get better.

I feel that this class was valuable and I will continue to use the information for future research and surveys.

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**Appendix A: Permission to Access Your Population**

Stephanie Canan <scanan@frontier.com>

To:

Amber Myers  
Thu 6/1/2023 6:24 PM

Yes we give permission  
Sent from my iPhone

On Jun 1, 2023, at 2:29 PM, Amber Myers <amber.myers@k12.wv.us> wrote:

Dear Stephanie Canan:

My name is Amber Myers, and I am completing a pilot study for EDF 625 Qualitative Research in Education at Marshall University. This project will involve completing two observations and two interviews to study in what ways, if any, is play-based learning incorporated into early literacy skills in a childcare setting. Information collected will remain confidential and be used to write a final report in the course that only the course instructor and I will have access.

I am writing to request your permission to complete observations and interviews. If you agree, and Monica Hoover agrees to allow me to complete the observations and interviews, can you reply to this email to confirm your permission?

Sincerely,

Amber Myers

*Amber Myers*

Early and Elementary Learning Specialist, MA

Marshall University Research Corporation

College of Education-June Harless Center

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**Appendix B: Pilot Interview Schedule**

Research Question:

In what ways, if any, is play-based learning incorporated into early literacy skills in a childcare setting?

Introduction:

1. What is your name and role within the center or school?
2. How long have you worked at this location?
3. What ages do you work with at this center or school?

Play-based Learning:

4. How do you define play-based learning?
5. How much professional learning have you had with the main topic being play-based learning?
6. Can you describe play-based learning within your center?
7. How do you set provocations up within the classrooms?
8. What types of materials do you use for play-based learning?

Literacy:

9. How do you define literacy?
10. How do you incorporate it in the classroom?
11. How much professional learning have you had pertaining to the science of reading and early literacy?
12. How do you integrate play-based learning with literacy?
13. What types of materials do you use for literacy?
14. Can you describe how you teach phonemic awareness?
15. Can you describe how you teach letter recognition?
16. How does curriculum, licensing, or standards dictate how you teach literacy?
17. Can you describe the resources you use for literacy integration?

Conclusion:

18. Is there anything you would like to add that you feel is important and relevant to the research of this pilot study?

Thank you:

I will send a card and some manipulatives to the two teachers that I am interviewing.

I am interviewing the assistant director/ teacher of the center I observed and a teacher from a different center.

Interview One:

Melinda Mack

Microsoft TEAMS- June 22, 2023

Interview Two

Jessica Jones

Microsoft TEAMS- June 28, 2023

**Appendix C: Proposed Revision to Interview Schedule**

Include how you would revise the interview schedule based on the results of your interview.

**Appendix D: Informed Consent****Consent to Participate in Research**

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a qualitative research project this semester. The graduate student who has approached you is enrolled in EDF 625 Qualitative Research in Education at Marshall University. One of the main goals of this course is for students to learn how to conduct qualitative research by engaging in an abbreviated pilot study with first-hand, real experiences doing fieldwork related to a topic of interest to them. As part of the fieldwork, each student is required to conduct a minimum of two participant observations and two individual, audio-recorded interviews. Individual interviews will be arranged at times and places that are convenient for you.

Ethical guidelines for research will be strictly observed. Even though you have decided to participate, you may end participation at any time during the project. Your privacy will be carefully protected. Only the student researcher and I will see your field notes or final paper unless you choose to be recognized. Should you choose to remain anonymous, interview transcripts will also be prepared without using full real names. Please use the checkboxes below to indicate your preferences.

JJ  I I prefer my name, words, and other identifying information be kept anonymous.  
Initial \_\_\_\_\_

I I prefer my name, words, and other contributions be recognized and attributed to me.  
Initial \_\_\_\_\_

You may keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to contact the graduate student or me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that appears to read "Yvonne M. Skoretz".

Yvonne Skoretz, EdD

I agree to participate in this qualitative research project.

Jessica Jones  
Participant's Name (printed)

Jessica Jones  
Signature

06/28/2023  
Date

Amber Myers  
Graduate Student's Name (printed)

Amber Myers  
Signature

06/28/2023  
Date



## Consent to Participate in Research

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a qualitative research project this semester. The graduate student who has approached you is enrolled in EDF 625 Qualitative Research in Education at Marshall University. One of the main goals of this course is for students to learn how to conduct qualitative research by engaging in an abbreviated pilot study with first-hand, real experiences doing fieldwork related to a topic of interest to them. As part of the fieldwork, each student is required to conduct a minimum of two participant observations and two individual, audio-recorded interviews. Individual interviews will be arranged at times and places that are convenient for you.

Ethical guidelines for research will be strictly observed. Even though you have decided to participate, you may end participation at any time during the project. Your privacy will be carefully protected. Only the student researcher and I will see your fieldnotes or final paper unless you choose to be recognized. Should you choose to remain anonymous, interview transcripts will also be prepared without using full real names. Please use the checkboxes below to indicate your preferences.

*m* I prefer my name, words, and other identifying information be kept anonymous.  
Initial

I prefer my name, words, and other contributions be recognized and attributed to me.  
Initial

You may keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to contact the graduate student or me.

Sincerely,

*Yvonne M. Skoretz*

Yvonne Skoretz, EdD

I agree to participate in this qualitative research project.

Melinda Mack  
Participant's Name (printed)

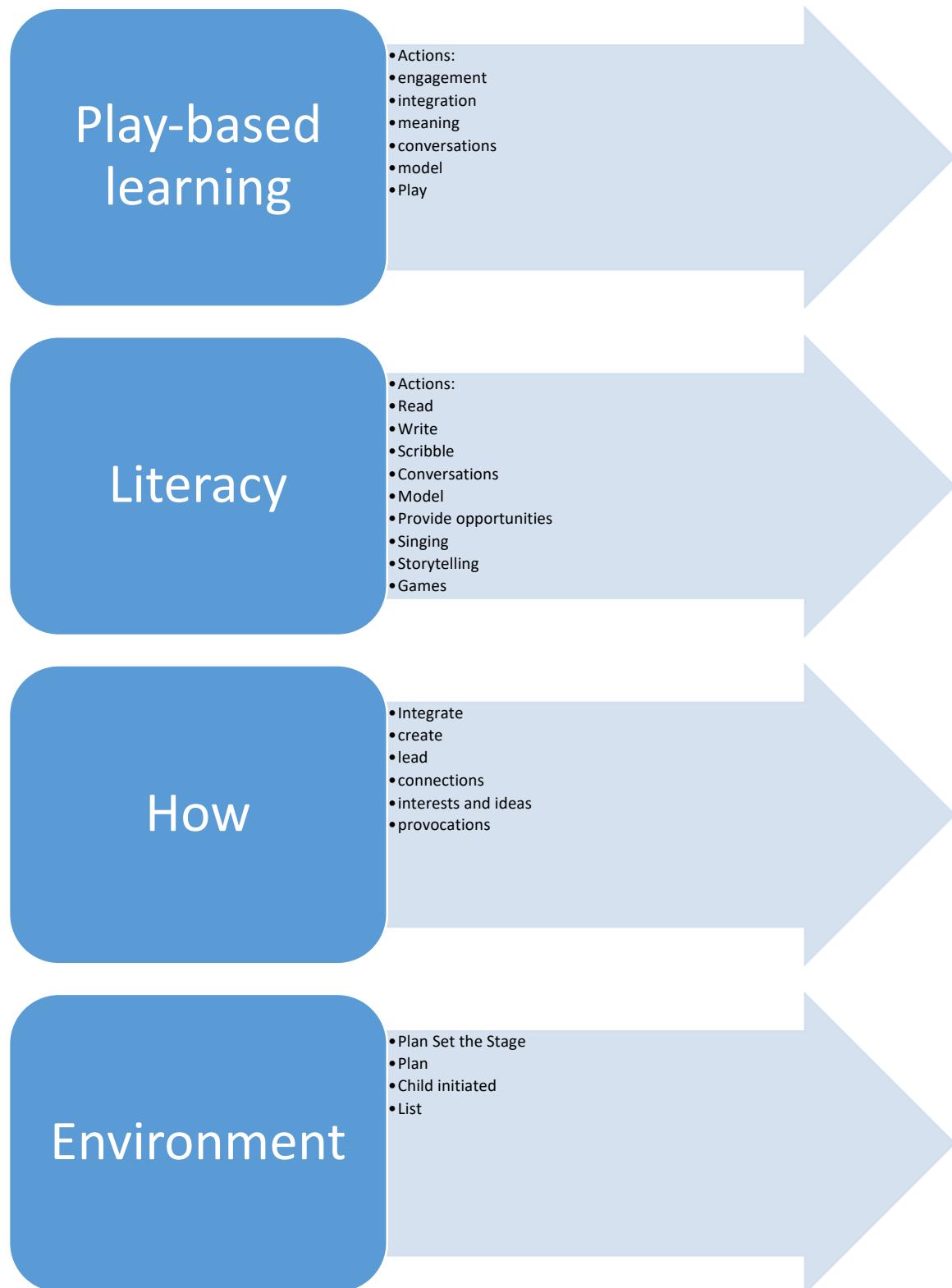
Yvonne Skoretz  
Signature

6/23/23  
Date

Amber Myers  
Graduate Student's Name (printed)

Amber Myers  
Signature

06/24/23  
Date

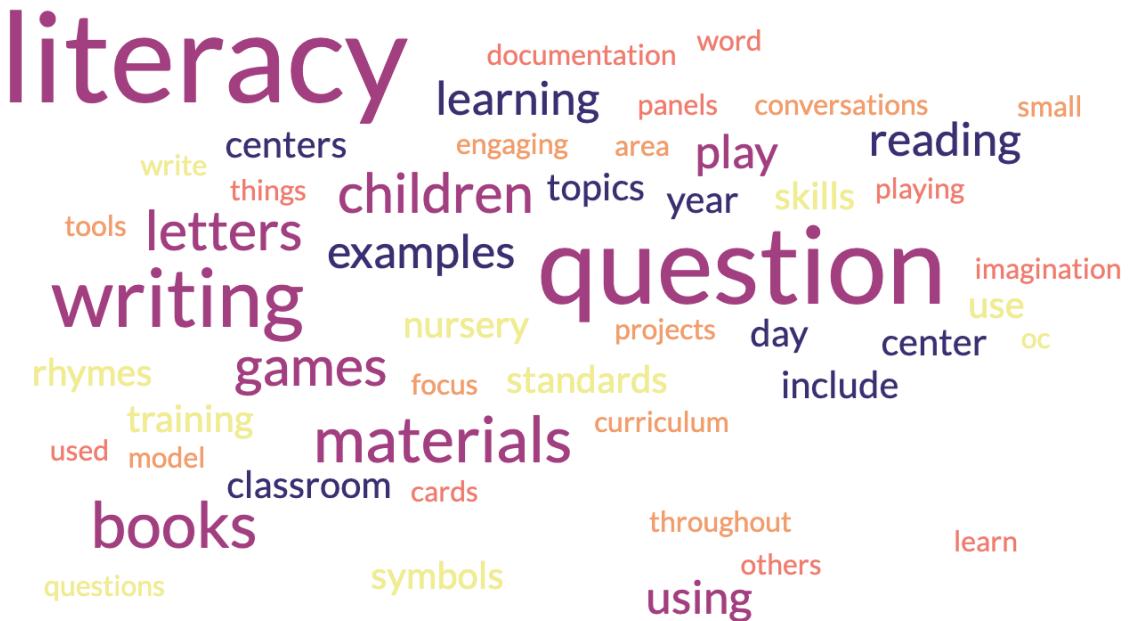
**Appendix E: Codebook**

Play-based learning and Literacy: actions you may see and use in the classroom to support them

HOW- how to implement play-based learning and literacy in the classroom

Environment- how to use the environment for play-based learning and literacy

I started off with 8 categories and then got them to four. I separated actions into play-based learning and literacy. Then I combined them for the how and environment. It helped me make sense of the data when I added the observations to the data. I am still not satisfied with it but it is getting easier. I am a visual person so using a word cloud and graphics helps me makes sense of the data.





My emerging themes seem to be play-based learning, literacy, how, and the environment. I divided it up into four after looking at the observations. Both teachers also discussed the environment and how to implement them in the classroom. I was also thinking about adding provocations or loose parts as a category. These were mentioned a lot. I struggled with trying to narrow it down and be meaningful. I am still not happy but working on it. I also wonder if I should combine the action section or separate how and environment into play-based and literacy.