MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERHERO PLAY
IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

DISSERTATION

Prepared in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School
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By

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This dissertation study examined the phenomenon of superhero play in an early childhood classroom. superhero play is an understudied and sometimes controversial form of play that is sometimes banned or limited in early childhood classrooms (Holland, 2003). The limited studies on superhero play focus on the teachers’ perspectives, often of those who ban or limit it, and on developmental perspectives emphasizing either positive or negative aspects of the play. The purpose of this study was to understand superhero play from multiple perspectives including the perspectives of the people involved, particularly the children and through teachers who support this play, and through theoretical perspectives, including sociocultural and poststructural.

This is an ethnographic study focusing on understand superhero play in context through a thorough examination of the school culture, the peer culture interested in superheroes, and the intersections between the school and peer culture. The primary methods were participant observation, with the researcher becoming a member of the school culture and peer culture interested in superheroes, interviews, video recording and revisiting, and document analysis.

Findings of the study reveal superhero play to be complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The findings from the school culture and teachers’ perspectives highlight how superheroes and superhero play became part of almost every aspect of the school
routines and activities. The teachers’ perspectives on supporting superhero play align with their valuing children’s interests, relationships, and using democratic practices. The findings from peer culture and children’s perspectives are presented through both a group and individual analysis. From the peer culture group, shared connections to superhero play included affiliation and inclusion, leadership, power, and the expression of care. Individual differences in the group included emotional connections, physical expression, and learning language. The intersections between the school culture and peer culture around superhero play occurred as a result of mediation from the teachers. The findings of this study have implications for classroom teachers to understand more about children’s interest in superheroes and how a set of teachers was able to mediate superhero play in the classroom context.
Dedicated to

The Teachers and Children at the Laboratory School

&

Steve and Audrey Galbraith
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic and Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Rationale</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Multiple Perspectives?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Dissertation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Perspectives on Superhero Play: Teachers, Children, and Families</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Perspectives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Perspectives</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families’ Perspectives</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Perspectives on Superhero Play</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Theoretical Perspectives</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Learning Theory</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychoanalytic Theory</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive-Developmental Theory</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural Theoretical Perspectives</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Perspective</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Culture Perspective</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical Perspective</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poststructural Perspectives</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Poststructural</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakhtin</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 68
   Ethnography ................................................................... 69
   Research Site and Participants ...................................... 73
     Research Site ................................................................ 73
     Curriculum .................................................................. 74
     Daily Schedule ............................................................ 75
   Participants .................................................................... 77
     Children ..................................................................... 77
     Adults ....................................................................... 78
   Access and Entry ............................................................ 79
   Researcher's Role ........................................................... 80
     Defining my Role ........................................................ 82
       Labeling Role as a Student .......................................... 82
       Shifting Positionings ................................................ 85
   Challenges in Research with Children ......................... 89
   Data Collection Methods ............................................. 92
     Participant Observation .............................................. 93
     Video Revisiting ........................................................ 95
     Interviews ................................................................... 96
     Artifacts ..................................................................... 97
     Viewing Children's Movies and Television Programs .... 97
     Personal Journal ........................................................ 98
   Data Analysis Process .................................................. 99
     Coding the data .......................................................... 99
       Generating categories and themes .............................. 100
   Trustworthiness ............................................................ 104
     Transferability .............................................................. 107

4. FINDINGS ......................................................................... 109
   Superhero Play in the School Culture ......................... 110
     Activities and Routines ............................................... 111
       Daily Schedule .......................................................... 111
       Arrival and Free Play ............................................... 113
         Arrival ................................................................. 113
         Home Toys ............................................................ 114
         Snack .................................................................. 114
       Circle Time .............................................................. 115
       Second Free Play ..................................................... 116
       Transitions ............................................................... 117
         Clean-Up ............................................................... 117
         Selecting a Seat for Lunch ...................................... 118
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1: Daily Routines in Preschool Classroom</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2: Children in the Classroom</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3: Classroom Teachers</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4: Becoming a Student</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5: Shifting Positions</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6: School Culture Taxonomic Worksheet</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Supporting Children’s Interests</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7: School Culture Taxonomic Worksheet</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Reasons for Limits on Superheroes</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8: Ways to Be Included in Superhero Play</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9: Ways to Exclude Someone from Superhero Play</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.10: Ron’s Taxonomic Worksheet [Excerpt]</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11: Alan’s Taxonomic Worksheet [Excerpt]</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1: School Culture Daily Schedule with Superhero Play</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2: Language in the School Culture</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3: Roles in Superhero Play</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4: Superhero Artifacts</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5: Relationship between popular culture and children’s interests in superheroes………………………………………. 187

4.6: Schedule Intersections of School Culture and Peer Culture (Superheroes)…………………………………………. 224

4.7: School culture and superhero interests………………………………………………..227
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1: Example of Sitting at Lunch</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2: Integrating Standards in Superhero Play</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photograph</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1: Documentation Example</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2: Documentation of Curriculum Areas</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3: Using Action Figures</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4: Making Plans with Home Toys</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5: Saved Sign</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6: Expression of Care</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7: Expression of Care 2</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This ethnographic study describes and analyzes the phenomenon of superhero play from multiple perspectives, including the children and teachers, as well as theoretical perspectives, including sociocultural and poststructural, that are applied to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon. The primary theoretical framework guiding this study is Corsaro’s (1985) concept of peer culture, with superhero play being an important part of children’s peer culture lives. The research design is an ethnographic study of children’s peer culture lives in an early childhood classroom. The study has implications for children as the study emphasizes the importance of their perspective in their daily lives; for educators who are challenged by superhero play in their classroom, and for the general public to contribute to the discussion of children’s interests and in relationship to media and popular culture.

Topic and Purpose

Superheroes, along with other heroic figures have been important and interesting to young children, especially boys, for generations. After the introduction of television, children’s play connected to superheroes increased dramatically (French & Pena, 1991). Currently, there seems to be a new resurgence of interest in superheroes as a part of popular culture. While it would be difficult to say there was ever more or less interest, as
it has been a long-term phenomenon, over the past few decades there has seemed to be waves within early childhood settings, particularly as reported by teachers (Allen & Pettit, 1987; Kostelnik, Whiren, & Stein, 1986; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995; Seiter, 1999). Despite this interest from children, however, many teachers are concerned about play connected to superheroes and it is often banned from the classroom through official or unofficial policies (Boyd, 1997; Holland, 2003).

According to Boyd (1997), superhero play is “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” (p. 23). When children pretend to be superheroes, they may use or construct weapons or engage in physical behaviors such as punching or kicking since many superheroes also engage in such behaviors and use weapons or special equipment. As a type of pretend play, superhero play is particularly common in the early childhood years; especially preschool since this is the golden age for pretend play (Garvey, 1990). While pretend play is a common type of play for both boys and girls, boys are more likely to engage in superhero play than girls.

Superhero play is considered to be a special kind of rough-and-tumble play (Boyd, 1997). Rough-and-tumble (R&T) play, like superhero play, is found more frequently among boys than girls, and is also a controversial type of play because people sometimes think it is aggressive or may lead to aggression (Boulton, 1996; Levin, 1998; Pellegrini, 1995, 1998; Schafer & Smith, 1996; Smith & Boulton, 1989, 1990; Wegener-Spohring, 1994). As a form of R&T play, superhero play is also often connected to war,
weapon, and violent play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Holland, 2003; Levin, 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995, 2006). As a result of these connections, studies about R&T and war and weapon play are often used to make generalizations about superhero play as well.

Many children are interested in superheroes and bring this interest into their play in early childhood classrooms, which has become controversial from the perspective of many early childhood educators due to the perceived connection between superhero play and violence and aggression. Despite this strong interest from both children and teachers, however, there have actually been relatively little studies examining superhero play. Holland (2003) concurs, “War, weapon and superhero play is a controversial, under-researched, and under-theorized aspect of children’s play, which is rarely discussed in an open-minded way” (p. xii). Furthermore, like Holland, I believe we need greater understanding of this topic overall, and I feel strongly that there is an urgent need to engage in research examining children’s perspectives to understand what their daily lives are like and how they experience their lives. For many young boys (and some girls), superhero play is something that they frequently engage in, and as such is something that must be important to them. Therefore, I believe we need a better understanding of what superhero play is and what it means to the children involved, particularly when there is the development of institutional policies outlawing something that may be valuable to members of that institution.
Teachers and the developmental perspective have been the primary focus of the already limited amount of research on superhero play. Bergen (1994) contends that our emphasis on developmental perspectives does not allow us to have enough understanding about the phenomena of superhero play. Studies that have examined aspects of the community or wider macrolevels have focused on the connection of the media on superhero and war play, (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990), and this examination also primarily emphasizes what teachers should do in relation to children’s interests and play connected to superheroes, war, and weapons.

Thus, there are several areas that are lacking in the examination of children’s superhero play: the child’s perspective; an understanding of the interconnections between children’s peer cultures and school culture; the broader community context, including the media, in relationship to superheroes; but most importantly an examination of the connections and interplays between all of these contexts and multiple perspectives. This study examines some of these areas through the following research questions:

- How is superhero play an aspect of the school culture?
- What are the teachers’ perspectives of superhero play?
- How is superhero play an aspect of children’s peer culture life?
- What are the children’s perspectives of superhero play?
- What is the relationship of superhero play as an aspect of peer culture to the school culture context?
- How do the teachers and children’s perspectives intersect?
- How do multiple theoretical perspectives interpret and inform our understanding of the phenomenon of superhero play?
Methodological Rationale

In order to understand these questions, I studied superhero play in context to understand the multiple perspectives of the people involved. This study is an ethnographic study of an early childhood classroom in which superhero play is occurring to get at a deeper understanding of the children’s perspectives on superhero play. Interpretive researchers have used ethnographies, particularly in anthropology, to understand the daily lives of people within a given context (Erickson, 1986). Interpretive refers to a “family” of research, such as ethnographies, case studies, and participant observation, which fit within an interpretive research paradigm. “An interpretive approach thus takes as its focus of inquiry the meaning of human action in cultural context” (Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992, p. 6). An ethnographic study provides a means to try to understand and interpret the “webs of significance” children spin in their daily lives (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). As such, ethnography is also a perspective (Fernie, Kantor, Klein, Meyer, & Elgas, 1988). Seeing ethnography as a perspective, means that as a researcher I am taking a stance to understand children’s daily lives in their peer culture as something valuable, interesting, and worthy of in-depth understanding.

Why Multiple Perspectives?

Approaching the study from multiple perspectives provides insight into the multiple ways of knowing and understanding the phenomena of superhero play.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of a perspective is: The relation or proportion in which the parts of a subject are viewed by the mind; the aspect of a matter or object of thought, as perceived from a particular mental ‘point of view’. Hence the point of view itself; a way of regarding (something) (Oxford English Dictionary, http://dictionary.oed.com/)
Thus, for the purpose of this study, a perspective is referred to according to this definition. There are multiple perspectives or “points of view” on superhero play, and as such, various perspectives that are possible to examine. For the purpose of this study, I am using two primary perspectives: the perspectives of the people involved, and theoretical perspectives that can be applied to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The perspectives of the people directly involved in or closely connected to the superhero play include the children and their teachers.

Multiple perspectives, including theoretical perspectives outside of the developmental tradition, allows the opportunity for multiple analyses and thus different ways of understanding than could be provided from only one perspective or point of view (Graue & Walsh, 1998). “The implication is that only a multiple perspective point of view can give us the broader view of the richness, complexity, and diverse meanings of children’s play” (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995, p. 171). Corsaro (1996) believes that in early childhood education we need research from multiple perspectives, particularly the perspectives of children, teachers, and families and how these intersect, to get deeper understanding of the complexity of issues, particularly connected to children’s lives.

There are multiple perspectives or “points of view” on the subject and topic of superhero play, and as such, various perspectives that are possible to examine. The perspectives of the people involved are important to provide contextual understanding and give the participants an opportunity to share their voices, which are often overlooked in many research studies. In this case, children’s perspectives and voices about superhero
play have been ignored in the scant research on the topic. The perspectives of theorists, whose concepts and ideas have been or can be applied to the study of superhero play, can further illuminate and enhance our understanding of superhero play through the application of various concepts and theoretical perspectives.

In order to get at multiple meanings of superhero play, I am using multiple theoretical frameworks, which I believe both compliment and enhance each other. These include sociocultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978), including Corsaro’s theory of peer culture (1985, 2003). Additionally, several poststructural theoretical perspectives will be used to examine superhero play from another lens or “reading” through the theoretical positions of Bakhtin (1981) to focus particularly on language and the discourse surround superhero play, Foucault (1980) to examine issues of power in relationship to superhero play, and Davies (2003) feminist poststructural theory to examine issues of gender in relationship to superhero play.

Overview of the Dissertation

The dissertation is presented in five chapters. Here in chapter 1, I present an overview of the topic of superhero play, the purpose of the study, and the methodological rationale of the study. Chapter 2 is a literature review examining the multiple perspectives on superhero play including the perspectives of teachers, children, families, and theoretical perspectives. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study framed by the research questions particularly examining the school and peer culture contexts connected to superhero play in this early childhood.
classroom. Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation with a discussion of the findings and implications for practice and future research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Superhero play is an understudied phenomenon (Holland, 2004). The following explores the literature on superhero play in a multiple perspectives frame. The first section examines the perspectives of people on superhero play, including teachers, children, and families. The second section explores theoretical perspectives and studies on superhero play. Together, these multiple perspectives help inform my own study of superhero play to understand what has been examined, what are the multiple viewpoints on the subject, and what are the areas we need to learn more about superhero play. It is within these spaces that I ground my study.

People Perspectives on Superhero Play: Teachers, Children, and Families

Studying the perspectives of people, in this case, teachers, children, and families, directly involved in superhero play is one way to study the topic of superhero play. Perspectives by people are not developed in isolation, but through engagement in discourses the people exist within and prescribe to (Bakhtin, 1981; Davies, 2003; Foucault, 1980). They have their own particular worldview that may be developed through a variety of influences including theoretical perspectives, influences from the mass media, personal experiences, and personal beliefs. Here I present literature connected to superhero play through the perspectives of teachers, children, and families.
Teachers’ Perspectives

Superhero play, as a topic, has primarily been considered from the perspective of teachers or the perspective of experts, including researchers and teacher educators. Experts often write for teachers and parents providing them advice and synopses of research on topics of interest including superhero play or related topics such as pretend play (Allen & Pettit, 1987; Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Bergen, 1994; Boyd, 1997; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; 1990; Church, 2003; Dawkins, 1991; Greenberg, 1995; Gronlund, 1992; Klemm, 1995; Kostelnik, Whiren, & Stein, 1986; Kuykendall, 1995; Levin, 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995; Miller, 2002; Perry, 2003; Pena, French, & Holmes, 1987). I include both of these perspectives in this section since I think they are directed toward similar purposes. The majority of articles about superhero play in Young Children and other popular journals come from experts, with a few notable exceptions of teachers writing about their own practice in relation to superhero play (Gronlund, 1997; Pena et al., 1987). For many early childhood teachers, their educational background has traditionally focused on developmental psychology and principles of child development, which influence their own perspectives, thus as will be shown in a later section, most of these writings by or for teachers emphasize the developmental benefits of children engaging in superhero play. Teachers’ perspectives are very important to understand, of course, because they have to interact with the children engaged in superhero play on a daily basis. Examining the topic of superhero play from the teachers’ perspectives we can understand how teachers feel about the play, how
teachers deal with the play in the classroom, and teachers’ perceptions about children in relationship to superhero play.

In one of the few studies directly inquiring into teachers’ perspectives, Levin and Carlsson-Paige (1995) conducted a survey questioning teachers’ perspectives about superhero play. They found the majority of the teachers were concerned about superhero play, specifically related to the Power Rangers, and most chose to ban the play within the classroom. Many of the teachers were very concerned about the Power Ranger play specifically because the characters in the show were real people as opposed to other cartoon based superhero shows such as The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and He-Man. The teachers felt that the children were having a greater difficulty distinguishing reality and fantasy due to the characters being real. They also felt that the play was much more violent and more imitative rather than creative. Further, the teachers were more concerned about Power Ranger play than other superhero play they had seen in the past, because they felt the children were really identifying with the Power Rangers. Based on their survey they concluded, “Teachers’ overwhelming response to the Power Rangers survey points to the fact that the Power Rangers are undermining children’s positive social development” (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995, p. 70). Boyd (1997) however criticizes this study stating the researchers only surveyed teachers who were attending one of their conference meetings discussing superhero play in the classroom and therefore the teachers in the audience were likely already concerned with the topic. Thus, their statement based on their limited sample of teachers may not be representative of a general perspective of teachers. Further, I think it is a strong statement to make by only
getting the perspectives of a few teachers and not inquiring into the perspectives of other people, particularly the children.

Boyd (1997) was also curious about teachers’ concerns about superhero play, especially about teachers’ claims that there has been a strong increase in children’s engagement in this type of play. She conducted a time interval sample of superhero play within her classroom and found that this type of play occupied a very minimal proportion of the children’s play. Furthermore she did not find any aggression connected to the limited amount of superhero play she observed.

Superhero play is also often connected to rough-and-tumble play (R&T). Researchers have also studied teachers’ and playground supervisors’ perceptions of this type of play (Boulton, 1996; Pellegrini, 1998, 2002; Schaefer & Smith, 1996). When asked about the perceived benefits of this type of play, most of the teachers believe they are “copying role models” from real life, television, and video games (42%), some believe they are expressing “dominance” (32%), and even less (9%) view this type of play as “natural” (Pellegrini, 2002, p. 240). Additionally, many teachers believe this type of play leads to real fighting, however based on some of Pellegrini’s earlier studies he found that rough-and-tumble play, playfighting, only occurs 10% of the time on the playground, and only about 1% of this leads to real fighting (2002). Teachers and playground supervisors also have difficulty differentiating between R&T play and aggression although as described earlier they are different conceptions (Boulton, 1996; Pellegrini, 1998; Schaefer & Smith, 1996). Pellegrini (1998) argues, “It may be necessary, from a policy perspective, to ‘educate’ these caregivers about the difference
between the two because, while R-and-T leads children into a very positive
developmental trajectory, this is not the case for aggression” (p.403). The same can be
argued about superhero play as a form R&T play. Teachers also express similar concerns
about aggression when children engage in war and weapon play (Carlsson-Paige &
show concern about superhero play because it is seen as aggressive, noisy, and they
worry the play may frighten other children (Bauer & Dettore, 1997).

Holland (2003) has examined superhero, war, and weapons play in the United
Kingdom and found that many teachers, as stated, choose to ban superhero, war play, and
other violent type play from the classroom altogether (Levin, 2003a; Levin & Carlsson-
Paige, 1995; Holland, 2003). In fact, within parts of the United Kingdom, a “zero
tolerance” policy has developed around the issue (Holland, 2003). An official policy in
the early childhood centers was never implemented, however, the unofficial policy
developed on its own across the country.

Other teachers encourage the children to “transform” superhero play to other play
scenarios about “real” heroes such as firefighters or police officers or into other types of
fantasy play connected to children’s literature including fairy tales (Dawkins, 1991; Pena
et al., 1987; Perry, 2003). While these type of heroes may have saliency and relevancy to
some children, as seen in the interest in the “Rescue Heroes” (toys and a television show
depicting representations of police officers and firefighters), for some children police
officers are not seen as “heroes.” Further, transforming the play may not address the
developmental needs or reasons children are interested in superhero type play, which may include issues of good vs. evil, power, magic, and feeling larger than life.

According to Holland (2003), general feminist perspectives have had some influence on the development of policies of zero tolerance or banning superhero play. As we know, most early childhood educators are female. Holland (2003) also contends that many teachers, who consider themselves as feminists, believe it “makes sense” to not tolerate violent play or play that seems to be aggressive due to their belief in the importance of peace. Holland states that during the 1970’s and 1980’s many feminist groups were concerned with male violence in general and while there is not specific literature supporting this connection, she believes the overall underground policy and support for zero tolerance of superhero play came in part from these movements. While in retrospect it may not be as important to understand where or how these policies developed, although it is certainly interesting, it is certainly important for teachers to reflect upon their own current practices and perspectives as teachers. “As long as we teachers become located – and thus locked – in our stories, the possibilities for alternative interpretation, for reflexivity and for self-criticism are greatly reduced” (Convery, 1999, p. 140, as cited in Holland, 2003, p.10). Taking a singular perspective, such as the teachers’ point of view, greatly limits our own understanding of the phenomena of superhero play, but also limits the teachers’ ability to reflect on her practice. This policy of zero tolerance, as will be shown throughout this piece, has little support from the extant research on superhero play from any of the theoretical perspectives.
While some teachers choose to ban or institute “zero tolerance” policies on superhero play, there are other teachers, such as Vivian Paley (1984, 2004) who have continuously struggled to understand herself as a teacher in relationship with children. In discussing her own and other teachers’ struggles with children’s superhero play over the years, she states:

Although we feared the influence of television, we were cutting down on the one activity that counteracts the mindlessness of cartoons. We blamed television for making children restless and distracted, then substituted an academic solution that compounded restlessness and fatigue. The children may have been the only ones capable of making sense of the confusion, and they did so whenever the schedule was cleared so they could play (Paley, 2004, p. 46).

In order to know more about what the play means to the children themselves, I believe, like Vivian Paley (2004) so eloquently describes, we need to study the topic from the children’s perspectives so they can help us “make sense” of struggles we face as teachers and families trying to understand superhero play.

Children’s Perspective

Some researchers have examined children’s perspectives about their pretend play in general. Fein & Wiltz (1998) asked children between the ages of 5-8 to reminisce about their pretense-play at ages 3-4, which they felt would provide a way to understand how children play in various contexts and in their own daily play routines. They found that children described either descriptions such as ‘playing house’ or stories of their play. Further, many of the children described roles they took on in pretense play. They found
that a large proportion of the 5-6 year old boys engage in role-play, especially taking on superhero or other fantasy-type roles.

Some teachers, as described above (Pena et al., 1987), have concerns that when children take on fantasy roles, such as superheroes, they are unable to or have difficulty separating reality from fantasy. In order to understand this topic from the children’s perspective, Fernie (1980) examined this topic with young boys, in kindergarten through grade 5. He showed children photographs of television characters and interviewed the children to understand their perceptions. He found that older children were able to differentiate fantasy from reality easily. He did find that the younger children sometimes had difficulty discerning that the superhero, on television, including his characteristics, such as possessing superpowers could be a real person; in general, they perceived Superman as continuing to be Superman when the movie or show ended. As Fernie (1980) states, the children believed that “he who flies does not cry” (p. 5). While his study provided some confirmation for teachers’ concerns about children’s ability to discern fantasy from reality, his study, because it examined the topic from the children’s perspectives, also found out some other interesting information. One of the most interesting findings of this study is that when asked who they would want to be out of all of the possible people all of the boys in the study selected a superhero. In fact, the younger boys actually chose some specific identity marker, such as having a similar hair color, to show they were indeed like the superhero. Thus, this examination of the child’s perspective opens up a greater understanding of children’s identification with superhero characters as well as a sense of how they perceive their own identity. This study helps us
to understand the intrigue of superheroes to young children, which many people still may have limited understanding if they base their information sources from different or limited perspectives, such as teachers.

Another important area to understand from the children’s perspective is what are their experiences as children engaging in superhero play. For children, superhero play may be appealing to children because it is a physical type of play, they can play with power, and they can try on different identities or roles (Bauer & Dettore, 1997). However, since these appeals have been determined primarily from adult’s observations and interpretations, there may be many other reasons or different reasons, including identifying with the character (Fernie, 1980), Children’s perspectives, I think, are important to understand in the multiple contexts children play in, including school, home, and the neighborhood. There are also multiple contexts within these settings, such as the classroom and the playground; in sanctioned and unsanctioned play settings (meaning – the experience children have engaging in superhero play that is allowed or in circumstances where the play is not allowed); in the home or outside the home, and the various settings superhero play may take place within the classroom. Corsaro (1985; 2003) was the first person to examine children’s experiences in their peer cultures from their perspectives, and other interesting studies have followed using his peer culture framework (Elgas, Klein, Kantor, & Fernie, 1988; Fernie, Kantor, Klein, Meyer, & Elgas, 1988). He provides excellent examples of understanding daily life in schools from the perspective of a child. These studies, although not specifically focusing superhero play, are important to my future study and my examination of superhero play for several
reasons. First, they provide solid examples of ways to understand children’s perspectives, which there is definitely a lack of across most of the research focused on children.

Second, they have examples of children engaging in superhero play or related play, such as rough and tumble (R&T), that provide examples of this type of play as an important part of the daily lives of some young children and their peer cultures (Elgas et al., 1988; Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1989, 1993). Finally, studies of children’s peer and school cultures provide examples of how to look at multiple perspectives in a research study, which is what this intends to do. These studies are included here because they do emphasize understanding the children’s perspectives, however they will be examined more in-depth under the theoretical perspective examining peer culture and school culture.

Vivian Paley has examined her own practice as an early childhood educator, and has explored numerous topics including as fantasy play and superhero play (1988, 2004). Paley consistently attempts to understand the child’s perspective across numerous issues, in relationship to also understanding her own perspective and how these multiple perspectives intersect within the daily lives of the classroom. As Paley expresses in her own narrative style, she believes storytelling through play, drama, and writing are essential tools for learning within the classroom setting, including play connected to superheroes.

Superhero play is serious play for young children, and like Paley (1984, 2004) I believe it would behoove teachers and other adults to step out of their own perspectives to try to understand what this play is for these young children, especially boys. Katch
(2001), a classroom teacher, has also conducted an in-depth study of children’s fantasy play, particularly around issues of violence and similar themes.

As much as I want to continue cutting off their talk as soon as it becomes violent, if I’m going to make any changes I’m going to have to understand their play. And that means that first, I have to listen (p. 15).

Reed and Brown (2000) also argue, “rough and tumble play, as well as other aspects of childhood, need to be examined in the context of childhood, not adulthood” (p. 115). Establishing policies of zero tolerance come from a singular adult perspective (Holland, 2003).

Overall, while there are a few researchers and teachers focusing on children’s perspectives, they are relatively overlooked. In relation to superhero play, adult perspectives and concerns often focus on children’s superhero play being fed from the media (Carlsson-Paige, 1987, 1990; 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b, Levin-Carlsson-Paige, 1995). Yet children’s perspectives about the media are almost nonexistent in television media forums (von Feilitzen & Bucht, 2001). Children are rarely portrayed in the media in general, and when they are often depicted as cartoon characters. When real children are represented, whether in news programs, television series, or commercials, they tend to be positioned as images ranging from troubled children who have lost their innocence to the overly saccharin image of the angelic child. Older children, have been interviewed and express their displeasure with how they are portrayed in the media (McCrum & Hughes, 1998, as cited in von Feilitzen & Bucht, 2001), however we still have little understanding of how younger children feel about the media. This is most likely related to the emphasis
on the traditional, developmental perspective that has an image of the child as immature and an adult-in-waiting. Thus, young children are not seen as capable of having a perspective on the media and their relationship and interests with the media. A more recent study on toddlers and the media (Howard & Roberts, 2002) has taken an alternative perspective that even young toddlers are active agents, not merely sponges soaking up the media, through their study of how toddlers watch and perceive the show “Teletubbies.” However, the general perspective of children as incompetent or incapable of expressing their perspective pervades, including studies of children within family contexts. Most studies about children, as a family member, in general, come from the perspective of their parents (Tudge, Hogan, & Etz, 1999).

Families’ Perspective

In the case of children’s superhero play, there is almost no information in relation to families’ perspectives at all, whether the parents’ perspective or the child’s perspective through the parents. Greenberg (1995), an educational consultant and parent, believes teachers should not ban superhero play from the classroom. She thinks teachers are a crucial source to engage children in conversations about their emotions and thoughts and worries that banning this type of play will suppress these feelings. While she would rather not live in a world where children are exposed to violence and guns, she acknowledges that this reality exists and children need a safe place to work through these issues. “A blanket disapproval of these toys and images and movements that are so important to our kids (yes, because of successful media coercion) just alienates the child from the adults and from school and from our ability to provide guidance” (p. 61).
As part of a larger study explaining children’s play with superhero toys, Parsons (2003) inquired into children’s superhero play at homes as a part of her study of children’s use of superhero toys. She found that 68.3% of children play with superheroes at home, according to their parents. Additionally, over 50% of the parents surveyed indicated that superhero shows, such as Batman and Spiderman, were what the children preferred watching. These differences were asked about children in general, it is not possible to differentiate if there were any specific differences by gender. While these are not perceptions, they are interesting to note since we have limited information about children’s superhero play in the home at all. Additionally she inquired into parent’s perceptions about superhero play. She found the parents she surveyed had mixed feelings. Most parents were concerned about safety, however most also felt that this type of play was natural and beneficial for their child’s overall development. Generally, it appeared that some parents were not overly concerned with this type of play, as long as there was some type of supervision. However, other parents had more specific concerns about superhero play and rough-and-tumble play, particularly emphasizing the needs for the right environment, typically outdoors with supervision. Other parents thought it was a good way to release energy. Thus, from this survey, there are feelings about superhero play across the spectrum, yet most were supportive given the right context.

In her personal study of children’s fantasy play, Katch (2001) became so concerned with some of the violent themes in the children’s play that she sent a note home to the families urging them to limit and control the violence the children see on television and from other media sources. She found that overall, most of the parents
responded positively and many expressed similar sentiments and concerns about children’s violent play. Many expressed they do limit this media exposure, however acknowledge that children access this from other sources, such as friend’s houses, the other parent’s home in families that were divorced, or in their own home because they were too busy to supervise what the children were watching. Thus, from this we can begin to understand more from the family’s perspective of how and why many children are viewing violent images in the media. This is important because teachers sometimes blame families for this exposure, yet it is important to note that it is not a simple issue of simply banning children from the media at home either. Additionally, in a study from a peer culture perspective, Kantor et al. (1989) found that some children, who did not watch television at home because their parents prohibited it, did not have the media knowledge about superheroes and consequently sometimes had difficulty entering the play of the peer culture, which often focused on knowledge of popular culture. Marsh (2003) examined home and school literacy and found popular culture texts are an important form of literacy in homes, but not valued in schools. Through questioning parents about these, at least one parent felt that schools should include popular culture within the school because of its importance for children. Thus, as we begin to take these multiple perspectives, we can see that it is rarely ever simple enough to say one way or the other.

All of the “people” perspectives described above can and have been examined from different theoretical perspectives, and this can enrich any singular person perspective or even a multiple person perspective. For example, we can examine
teachers’ perspectives about superhero play from a developmental theoretical viewpoint. Further, we can examine all of the peoples’ perspectives using a sociocultural lens. Within the next section, I will examine how superhero play has and can be studied from multiple theoretical perspectives including developmental, sociocultural, and poststructural.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Superhero Play**

Theoretical perspectives are another way to examine the phenomenon of superhero play. Within this section, I will explore three primary theoretical perspectives: developmental, sociocultural, and poststructural.

*Developmental Theoretical Perspectives*

The developmental theoretical perspective has been the dominant perspective in much of educational research (Kantor & Fernie, 2003). Developmental researchers are typically interested studying children and childhood in search of the best or most efficient trajectories toward adulthood, thus most studies examine causal or correlational factors, or dualistic relationships such as is superhero play positive or negative for development, and are typically experimental in nature. Theorists looking at children’s play developmentally, typically view play in terms of how it affects the individual child’s development, including physical, social, and emotional. Developmental perspectives also look at children within contexts, however the emphasis is primarily focused on the individual within the context (Ramsey, 1991). The following four developmental theories, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973), Psychoanalytic Theory (Freud, 1900-1939), Psychosocial Theory (Erickson, 1980), and Cognitive-Developmental Theory
(Piaget, 1962), have been used to study superhero play specifically, or have made connections to superhero play.

**Social Learning Theory.** Bandura’s (1973) social learning theory hypothesizes that people acquire behaviors through observations and subsequent modeling of other people’s behavior. He believes that people develop a system of sorting behavior choices by keeping behaviors that have found to be successful and getting rid of those behaviors that were not successful, useful, or productive. Bandura was also interested in aggression. In connection to his interest in aggression, he was also interested in the relationship of television and aggression. He conducted a metaanalysis of research studies examining the relationship between television viewing and aggression, finding that there is a strong correlational relationship between viewing violence on television and the expression of aggressive behaviors both in the short and long-term.

Like Bandura (1973), some researchers are interested in the connection between viewing television, such as superhero cartoons, and aggression. Boyatzis and Matillo (1995) were interested in how children imitate television characters and how this imitation connects to the expression of violence, thus following Bandura’s (1973) linear model of observation/experience ⇒ emotional arousal ⇒ expression of behavior. In their study, they created an experimental condition of two groups, the *Power Rangers* and the control group, to examine children’s aggression after viewing an episode of the *Power Rangers* in their classroom. Both groups were a combination of boys and girls. The *Power Rangers* group watched an episode of the television show and the control group did not watch any show. They found that the girls in both groups did not commit any
aggressive acts. However, they found that the boys in both groups committed some aggressive acts, while the boys in the *Power Rangers* group committed significantly more aggressive acts that were both “severe” and “hostile.” These findings are certainly alarming, however there are several aspects of the study that need to be questioned. The researchers did not define in their article what was a “severe” or “hostile” aggressive act. Thus, it is unclear what is actually aggression from the researchers’ perspective, which is important to note because some people, particularly females, have difficulty discerning what is aggression (Boulton, 1996; Pellegrini, 1998; Schaefer & Smith, 1996).

Additionally, the researchers claim that this study is very interesting because it was conducted in a naturally occurring context, the classroom. However, while the classroom is a natural environment for the children, by setting up an experimental situation they dramatically changed the natural environment because the school never watches videos. Thus, this was a very unusual activity for this “natural” setting, which, as the researchers admit, may have an influence on the children’s reactions to the video.

In this theory, children are also depicted as passive recipients of aspects of their environment, such as the media (Boyatzis & Matillo, 1995). The perspective does not allow for an understanding of children’s perceptions or perspectives of superhero play, the television shows, or what is or is not aggression from their perspective. Further, because social learning theorists, such as Bandura (1973), are primarily interested in causal relationships, the types of studies from this perspective are limited. This perception of superhero play in connection to the media and aggressive behavior is
common, thus, knowledge of this perspective is essential for me to have in order to counter arguments against other possibilities I and others may find.

Psychoanalytic Theory. Psychoanalytic theorists, such as Freud, provide another perspective on superhero play. Freud was also interested in fantasy play. In terms of play, Freud (1958) thought, “every child at play behaves like an imaginative writer, in that he [sic] creates a world of his own or, more truly, he arranges the things of this world and orders it in a new way that pleases him better” (p. 45 as cited in Landreth & Homeyer, 1998). Because children can symbolize in a play situation, it is a safe way to express their inner most thoughts and feelings that they couldn’t do by just talking out loud. The process of play provides healing for hurts, releases emotions, dissolves tension, and gives vent to pent-up urges toward self-expression” (Landreth & Homeyer, 1998, p. 194). Play is a natural way children express emotions, feel experiences of power, and through play children are able to make the world the way they would like it to be. According to Koplow (1996), “In order to avoid feeling overwhelmed by relative helplessness, preschool children borrow strength through their identifications with parental figures and “superheroes” who become sources of pride and hopefulness. While it is difficult for children to fulfill their desires to “be big like Daddy” in the here and now, enacting superhero fantasies allows them a less conflicted route to a position of power and status” (p. 9). Due to the many developmental benefits of play, especially emotionally, therapists use play therapy to help children having emotional difficulties or challenges work through emotions and feelings in a safe context (Axline, 1955; Koplow, 1996). Play therapy provides a context “using play symbols to establish a connecting dialogue
between child and therapist, and between the child’s conscious and unconscious experience” (Koplow, 1996, p. 75). Thus, according to a psychoanalytic perspective, psychological development has a very important connection to play, including superhero play, especially for emotional development.

Freud’s catharsis theory connects the play of children as a way to release their energy, emotions, and frustrations. According to this theory, children play to “get it out of their system” (Holland, 2003, p. 36). According to Holland (2003), Freud’s catharsis theory holds some promise to sway teachers away from banning superhero play. First, she believes the view that children use play to “get it out of their system” (p. 36) is a relatively common view, which Parsons (2003) also found in her survey of parent’s perspectives on superhero play. Second, Biblow (1973, as cited in Holland, 2003) found that children who engage in high-fantasy play are better at reducing or changing their emotional states that may lead them to act aggressively. Moreover, if this correlation exists, then Holland argues that children should be free to express themselves in the fantasy play of their choice, such as superhero play, to reduce or change their emotional states. In fact, she found that children expressed less aggressive behaviors in programs that eliminated their ‘zero tolerance’ policy on superhero play, thus possibly supporting the perspective that play can be cathartic.

Psychosocial Theory. Erikson’s (1980) psychosocial perspective also shares many of these beliefs about the connection to play, but emphasizes interpersonal development over intrapersonal. Within his well-known stages of development, Erikson (1980) felt that early childhood was an important time for identity development. He believed at this
stage the child is finally aware that “he is a person, the child must now find out what kind of a person he is going to be” (p. 78). Due to the development of mobility and language, Erikson believes the child is able to “expand his imagination over so many things he cannot avoid frightening himself with what he himself has dreamed and thought up” (p. 78). As such, early childhood is an important time for imagination, fantasy play, and trying on “grown-up” roles (Pettit, 1992; VanHoorn, Monighan-Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1999). Children develop their identities in relationship to real or fictional people (Erikson, 1980). The child can identify with realistic or unrealistic people available in the child’s worlds, which are reflective of the historical times the child lives within. This comment is quite important because these superhero characters may be quite salient identifiers based on their everyday lived experiences (Fernie, 1980). Although there have not been any specific studies done using this theoretical perspective in relation to superhero play, as a perspective, it provides a lens to examine certain aspects about superhero play including issues of emotions, identity development, and development of identity in relationship to others. Early childhood is an important time to try out different identities and roles, both realistic and fantastic. Anyone observing children in early childhood can see that this activity occupies much of their time as children pretend to be mommies, firefighters, princesses, teenagers, lions, dogs, and superheroes. According to Bergen (1994), the psychosocial theory provides a lens to see the “expression of aggressive actions in play as a way children can constructively deal with their emotions and gain a feeling of power and control over their environment” (p. 300).
Together, the psychoanalytic and psychosocial theoretical perspectives may provide additional insight into the phenomenon of superhero play in relation to emotional development and identity development. Both of these aspects seem important to in relationship to superhero play, yet they have not been used to further understand the phenomenon.

*Cognitive-Developmental Theory.* Piaget’s (1962) cognitive-developmental theory has been very influential in the field of early childhood education. Symbolic play is the primary play of early childhood, which according to Piaget (1962), sets the stage for children to engage in more complex play, games with rules, as they move into the concrete operational stage in their school age years. Piaget also felt that in early childhood, symbolic and fantasy play involve over-assimilation (Bretherton, 1984; Monighan-Nourout & VanHoorn, 1991). Nicolopoulou (1993) explains,

During an act of intelligence, the subject adapts to the requirements of the external reality while, at the same time, maintaining mental structures intact. Play, in contrast, is characterized by the primacy of assimilation over accommodation – the subject incorporates events and objects into existing mental structures (p. 3). This over-assimilation, according to Piaget (1962) is how children can transform what occurs in reality to meet their own desires. Piaget’s interest in the emotional aspects of play is generally overshadowed due to his primary emphasis on cognition (Singer & Singer, 1990). However, according to Nicolopolou (1993), “Piaget’s analysis of the second stage of play is marked by an emphasis on the role of fantasy and a concern with the emotional element in psychological activity and development (although his discussion
of the emotional element is so understated that it is often easy for readers to miss” (p. 6). Thus, it appears, this emotional aspect was important to Piaget in relationship to cognition. Children are able to transform what occurs in their daily lives, whether at home, from children’s literature, or from television programs such as superhero cartoons when they play (Bretherton, 1984). As children become more mature, their play can become increasingly complex. Their roles can become complex and elaborate. They can not only say “I’m Superman”, they can enact Superman’s characteristics of being able to fly, to leap tall buildings, and to save the world from mass destruction along with getting their peers together as a member of the Justice League of Super Friends.

Cognitive maturity also affords children the ability to transform objects with greater complexity. According to Fein (1975, as cited in Garvey, 1990) in early stages of development, children need more realistic objects to represent what they are pretending (i.e. a child needs an object that closely resembles a cape to fly), thus realistic objects are useful to stimulate pretend play in the toddler years when children are just beginning to be able to represent ideas symbolically. However, when children become older they need less realistic objects, and actually creating objects and being more imaginative may help stimulate more imaginative play. Therefore, the older child may be able to create a superhero headquarters in the block area with various unit blocks. Interestingly, when children get older, they return to needing realistic objects in their play, such as chess pieces. This “ability to create make-believe worlds should not be taken for granted” (Bretherton, 1984, p. 37).
Play researchers, influenced by Piaget and general developmental theories have created stages of play development and have also identified types of roles and themes children use during play (Garvey, 1990). Garvey identifies common play themes in early childhood including, “averting threat,” “treating-healing,” and “real life” themes, such as driving, cooking, and telephoning. Kostelnik et al. (1986) observed three prominent themes of superhero play: capture and rescue, submit or vanquish, and attack and flee. These relate and expand upon the common themes of play Garvey (1990) found, particularly “averting threat” and “treating-healing.”

There have been significant amounts of research related to pretense play in the developmental literature. Within this vast amount of literature, however, there is still little directly connected to superhero play, and frequently when it does it is connecting superhero play as a form of pretense play, not studying it as a type of play itself. Much of the research connects to Piaget’s theory, however others combine multiple developmental perspectives. Thus, much of the following explores the overall developmental research of superhero play as a form of pretense play. By and large, the research supports pretense play as important developmentally. Developmentally, pretense play is connected to all areas of development including linguistic, social, emotional, and physical (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Berk, 1994; Gowen, 1995; Kostelnik et al, 1986; Mann, 1996; Monighan-Nourout & VanHoorn, 1991; Perry, 2001). Distinguishing between reality and fantasy is often a concern for teachers, particularly as children identify with superhero characters, while researchers support that pretense play helps children to distinguish reality from fantasy (Levin, 1998b; Mellou, 1994). Children prepare for adult life through playing

Superhero play has also been connected to aesthetic development (Bauer & Dettore, 1997). Gross and Clemens (2002) also argue for the support of children’s play and art related to violence. They found that children used violent play and art to express their feelings and emotions after the events of September 11th. They believe that children engage in this play for purposeful reasons and that teachers need to support this play in order for the teachers to be able to observe and understand what children are working through. “Rather than banning play or art containing violence, adults should help children use these activities to work out an understanding, regain control, and reach some resolution on the violence they see” (p. 47).

Pretense play, particularly due to symbolic representation, is represented as a precursor to reading and writing and therefore is important for literacy development (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Christie, 1998; Dyson, 1991; Ishee & Goldhaber, 1990; Monighan-Nourout & VanHoorn, 1991). Additionally, pretense play is related to narrative development and is thus a way to develop greater understanding of plot, setting, character, themes, and general development of a story (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Glaubman, Kashi, & Koresh, 2001). Imagination is a “central component” of narrative
and pretend play (Glaubman et al., 2001, p. 134). Singer and Singer (1990) used a multiple theoretical perspective, cognitive-affective, to explore the multiple developmental benefits of imagination and make-believe play. Superhero play is a form of imaginative play. In imaginative play, children are afforded the opportunity to imagine new possibilities and to do things differently. Imagination in make-believe play is associated with development of positive emotions and the ability to be flexible in a difficult situation (Monighan-Nourout & VanHoorn, 1991).

Due to the perspective that pretense play is important developmentally, some researchers have examined the pretend play of children deemed “at-risk” from this perspective. Bretherton (1987, as cited in Dunn & Hughes, 2001) has found differences in children’s pretense play in connection to their level of attachment. Dunn and Hughes (2001) studied the pretense play, specifically ‘violent’ play, of “hard-to-manage” children, as identified by their teachers. It was an experimental study examining a child and the child’s “friend” (identified by the classroom teacher) playing in a separate context away from the classroom. They found that the “hard-to-manage” children expressed more violent fantasies during their play scenarios. Further, the violent scenarios tended to be less developed, and they particularly had a difficult time taking another child’s perspective. Additionally, the violent scenarios correlated with more angry emotions, antisocial acts, and social interactions focusing on conflict. While the researchers did not examine the children’s lives in context, they purport, “Clearly, television watching, exposure to violent films and videos, family experiences, and the street and neighborhood lives these children led may all have contributed to their choice
of violence in their pretend play” (p. 503). Dawkins (1991), through a review of the literature examining television and aggression found, however, that there is no definitive causal relationship between television and aggression. Thus, it is interesting that the researchers can make a casual reference linking violence in children’s pretend play to a myriad of other areas from television viewing to their lives in a community without actually studying these contexts.

Pretense play has also been examined in relation to gender role development (Etaugh & Liss, 1992; Monighan-Nourot & VanHoorn, 1991). Superhero play, as mentioned, is typically gender-segregated play, with boys being the primary players (Gronlund, 1992; Paley, 1984). Superhero play, as a type of rough-and-tumble play is often physical (Boyd, 1997). Mothers tend to be more cautious and concerned about their daughters being injured in play than their sons (Morrongiello & Dawber, 2000). Another link of gender and superhero play is in relationship to parents’ consumer practices. Parents purchase and encourage children to play with socially ascribed gender toys (i.e. dolls for girls and military toys for boys), and sometimes even punish children for playing with toys deemed for the opposite gender (Etaugh & Liss, 1992). This punishment occurs more often for boys than girls and this has been supported by other studies finding that there is more tolerance for girls crossing gender boundaries than boys. Teachers, primarily female, are also more tolerant of girls in cross-gender roles than boys (Cahill & Adams, 1997). These differences in tolerance were linked to the teachers’ perceptions of child rearing and homophobic beliefs. Additionally, teachers have been found to give more attention, both negative and positive, to boys over girls,
which may contribute to their being overly concerned with boys’ superhero play than girls’ fantasy play. Moreover, peers also play a part in gender role socialization by supporting gender-typed play and behaviors. McMurray (1994) found that peers often teased each other for using toys that were typically constructed as toys for the opposite gender. Neppl and Murray (1997) found boys engaged in more adventure-type themes, such as superheroes, in either same-sex or mixed-sex pairings. Additionally, they found that both girls and boys were more cooperative in same-sex pairings. The media also has an influence in relationship to gender. The media creates television shows, and has toys connected with superhero series, that are often creating a specific gendered identity by the portrayal of characters. Most superhero characters are male. If female characters are included, they are typically helpless or if powerful, not as powerful as their male counterparts (Marsh, 2003). This may influence boys and girls decisions to connect with superhero play and characters.

As boys more often participate in rough-and-tumble play activities, it is worthy of discussion of the topic of gender role socialization. Boys express care and friendship (Reed & Brown, 2000; Reed, Brown, & Roth, 2000) and affiliation (Smith & Boulton, 1990) through R&T play. R&T play has been linked to children’s development of social competence (Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1988; Smith & Boulton, 1990). In terms of television viewing, boys watch more cartoons and action programs than girls (Singer & Singer, 1990). Gronlund (1992) was also concerned with the lack of girls’ interest in superhero play. Through a closer examination, she found that girls often engaged in this play through “superheroine” characters such as moms, queens, princesses, Barbie, and
She-Ra, a female character in the He-Man series. She made connections through this play with the issues of power and control, which are similarly played out through boys’ engagement in superhero and R&T play. Through this connection, she was able to see the similarities between the play of both boys and girls, which she had not seen previously. Paley (1984) also found these connections as she examined and considered children’s superhero play in her preschool classroom.

Toys, like rough-and-tumble play and television, are also a source of debate, often setting up a dichotomy of appropriate versus inappropriate toys in early childhood. Barbies (Abraham & Lieberman, 1985), electronic toys (Levin & Rosenquest, 2001; Marsh, 2002), and war and superhero toys (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1987, 1990; Levin 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b) are controversial toys. In 1984, the Federal Communications Commission deregulated children’s television (Levin, 1995, 1998b). At this time, children’s toys could be marketed together with children’s television programs. According to Levin (1998b), one year after the deregulation 90% of the most popular toys according to sales were connected to television shows and 70% of the shows were considered to be violent. She also expresses significant concerns about the types of toys that are marketed to children from these shows and claims most lead children to imitate the television characters and thus decrease children’s imaginative and more constructive play.

Two studies, however, have found that character toys, such as Barbies and superhero characters actually support more imaginative play (Abraham & Lieberman, 1985; Parsons, 2003). A study of gender-typed pretense play examined how girls use
Barbie dolls in relation to typical baby dolls commonly found in preschools (Abraham & Lieberman, 1985). The girls developed more elaborative pretense scenarios with the Barbie dolls than the baby dolls. Moreover, the baby doll play tended to be more aggressive and less productive. The researchers hypothesize that the baby dolls may have led to more domestic scenarios involving discipline and that the baby dolls were more limited due to baby scenarios typically centering on feeding, sleeping, diapering, and discipline. Conversely, the Barbie dolls appear to allow multiple play scenarios and thus more productive and imaginative play. I include this study within this review, because many teachers, similarly to superhero characters, often see Barbie dolls as negative. Thus, it is possible that like Barbie, superhero figurines may open up more imaginative and dramatic scenarios, despite teachers’ perceptions that they inhibit creative play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin, 1995, 1998b, 2003b).

Parsons (2003) examined the use of specific superhero figures versus non-superhero figures in children’s pretense play. She found both sets of figures supported imaginative play, especially “action/battling” themes. A possibility, she suggested, is that children may tend to have this interest and will play it out regardless of the types of toys available. However, the superhero figures created a context where children had to negotiate more with peers to establish themes. She hypothesizes this may be because the superhero figures led to more superhero-themed play, which required the children to share more knowledge and thus the need to negotiate to achieve intersubjectivity, or mutual understanding, to plan and maintain a play scenario (Goncu, 1998).
The cognitive-developmental perspective provides a lens to examine superhero play as a form of pretense play. It can be examined for its overall developmental benefits. Further, in this perspective superhero play can be examined in relationship to developmental issues including aggression, gender, television, and toys. However, because the developmental perspective focuses on the individual, questions about the child in relation to others and to the child within context are overlooked or unexamined.

While the developmental perspective is not wrong, it is extremely limited in that it fails to recognize other contexts that encourage war play among children. War play is the children’s expression of a major theme that is prominent in many aspects of popular culture (King, 1992, p. 55).

Thus, this perspective brings up many important issues connected to superhero and war play, related to gender, television, and toys, yet perceives them only in relationship to development. As this overview has shown, there is a significant amount of research from the developmental perspective connected to superhero play as a kind of pretense play, although there is still relatively little directly connected to superhero play as its own phenomena. While there are limits from this perspective, overall the perspective supports superhero as a legitimate form of play in terms of its developmental benefits. In the following perspectives, sociocultural and poststructural, these issues will be addressed from a very different perspective.
Sociocultural Theoretical Perspectives

A sociocultural perspective differs significantly from the developmental or “traditional” perspective (Elgas, 2003). The traditional perspective, as described above, views superhero play in terms of its developmental benefits. A sociocultural perspective is an alternative perspective to the traditional literature on many of the issues about children including play, peer culture, and superhero play as an important feature of many peer culture groups. “Educational researchers with a sociocultural perspective hold that classrooms can be viewed as cultures where life is patterned, constructed over time by its members interacting with, and reacting to, each other” (Kantor et al., 1993). Within this section, I will examine Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural perspective, Corsaro’s (1985, 2003) peer culture perspective, and a sociopolitical perspective (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin, 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Perspective. Vygotsky (1978) is well known for his sociocultural theory emphasizing the importance of social, cultural, and historical contexts. However, he is less known for his theoretical perspective on play, which he briefly describes in Mind and Society (1978). An oft-cited quote, Vygotsky describes play as creating “a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 102). Inherent within this quote is the important connection to children’s social and emotional development. Vygotsky believed play allowed children the ability to fulfill desires that are otherwise unattainable in their own life (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003) as well as to fight desires and develop new desires (Vygotsky, 1978).
In this perspective, play is the “leading factor in development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 101). Also referred to as a “leading activity,” play is given primacy as one of the most important contributors to development. Conversely to Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978) believes play leads development, meaning play affords children the opportunity to develop that they wouldn’t have if viewed strictly from a maturation standpoint. Through pretense play, Vygotsky believed children are also appropriating the sociocultural expectations of their culture (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). As they try on roles they also appropriate the rules, norms, and expectations of the roles of mom, teacher, doctor, or superhero. However it is also a creative appropriation, because children can also change the roles in their play. The child “makes it its own” (p. 279). According to Vygotsky (1978), “what passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behavior in play” (p. 95). For example, if asked what a superhero does, the child may not be able to tell you in great detail all aspects about what it means to be a superhero. However, in play, they are able to express these various characteristics that they didn’t necessarily know they knew.

Vygotsky also describes play providing children the context of separating of thought and meaning from objects and actions (Berk, 1994; Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). As we know, children symbolically represent objects and actions in pretense play. However, connected to the rules of play, children cannot represent an object or action with anything he wishes; it has to relate to features of the object or action. For example, Vygotsky describes a child using a stick to create a riding horse. The child cannot use just any object to represent the horse; the object itself needs to abide by the rules of “rideability”
(i.e. something the child can straddle with two legs). Vygotsky (1978) uses the term “pivot” to describe how young children use a symbolic representation with features connected to the object. The “pivot” is a way of separating the meaning of the object from the object itself, which for Vygotsky is essential for children to learn the symbolic codes, such as words, of their culture. Hence, the pivot also provides the child with the ability to be “beyond his average age” because the child is able to separate objects and actions yet is not aware they have this capability. However, play is not equivalent to freedom. According to Vygotsky (1978) all play has rules whether it is symbolic play or games with rules, hence play can also be constraining. If conceptualizing play as developing primarily from pretense play to games with rules, imagination and rules exist within each, however in pretense play imagination is more prevalent with rules more in the background and then rules take center stages with games with rules and imagination shifts to the back (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). Thus, “every game with rules contains an imaginary situation” (p. 95). Rules of play make play enjoyable for children (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003).

In connection to a study of young children’s peer culture, play especially symbolic play, is an important feature of their peer culture activities. Specifically, in terms of superhero play, there are certain symbols that fit the “rules” of superhero play. For example, for a child to fly like a superhero they need to use a cape. The essential features of the cape are that it is lightweight and that it will float in the air when the child reaches a certain speed. To meet these features, children will typically use cloth type material, that is thin, relative long, and can attach or tuck into their shirt. They wouldn’t
use an object, such as a block, to represent the cape because it doesn’t have the features of a cape. Further, what greater activity than superhero play could provide children with the opportunity to become “a head taller than himself” (p. 102).

From this perspective, we are able to see play as a social, which we have yet been able to from the developmental perspectives. Related studies have examined the relationships between caregivers, including parents and teachers, in supporting children’s development of play through scaffolding (Berk, 1994). From this perspective social contexts are emphasized over the individual, thus play is dependent upon intersubjectivity; “a process whereby individuals involved in the same activity who begin with different perspectives arrive at a shared understanding” (Berk, 1994, p. 36; Goncu, 1998). Intersubjectivity is extremely important for peer negotiation and problem solving in pretense play and thus is very important for superhero play.

Nicolopoulou (1993) connects Paley’s (1984, 2004) work to the sociocultural perspective due to her examination of children within the social context of the classroom as well as her emphasis on play as a sociocultural activity as children construct the social world of the classroom through play. As mentioned earlier in the children’s perspective, her work frequently highlights superhero play as an important part of sociocultural context of the classroom. Nicolopoulou (1993) also believes narrative stories, like the ones Paley helps her students to create from their play interests, “are meaningful texts which, if analyzed carefully, can reveal something about the way children view the world, especially social relationships” (p. 17). These narratives provide the context to examine complex issues such as race, class, gender, inclusion, as Paley has done (1984,
1988, 1992, 1999, 2000, 2004). Play is narrative and should be considered as a “meaningful text.”

One of the primary shifts from the developmental perspective to the sociocultural perspective is how play is viewed and analyzed. Previously, children and children’s behavior were the typical units of analysis. In the sociocultural perspective, narratives, games, such as those used in the Fifth Dimension project (Nicolopoulou, 1993), and contexts become units of analysis rather than individuals. The focus is on the social context, the culture, and the activity systems. Using Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory as a perspective allows numerous possibilities that have not been possible previously. One, superhero play in and of itself can be analyzed. Superhero play, as a form of play, has to have rules, thus, we can ask, “What are the features, aspects, rules, of superhero play in a given sociocultural setting?” Moreover, because of Vygotsky’s beliefs about play, we can examine superhero play in relationship to his theory. Superhero play, according to a Vygotskian perspective, allows children to achieve desires such as power, control, and the ability to change situations that they cannot do in their everyday lives. An analysis from this perspective can look at how children, both individually and as a group, achieve these types of desires through play. Additionally, if play is the leading activity of development (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003), how does it lead all aspects of development? Furthermore, children appropriate aspects of their sociocultural worlds through play. Questions related to this are, “How are children appropriating sociocultural aspects and how are children participating in ‘creative appropriation’ and making it their own?” I think this is particularly important in relationship to the media. The developmental
perspective places children basically at the mercy of the media, however, from a sociocultural perspective children can be studied in relationship to how they appropriate the media and other sociocultural features, including a creative appropriation.

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is broad, however there are some aspects that cannot be answered within this perspective, however many of them can be from perspectives that have built off of Vygotsky’s general sociocultural theory. While sociocultural contexts are essential aspects of his theory, he focused more on larger contexts than localized contexts, such as the peer and school cultures Corsaro (1985) describes. Additionally, he connects children as desiring power and acting on this in play, however this perspective does not allow for a strong analysis of power itself. This perspective also does not provide a strong lens for examining language and discourse, specifically within classroom contexts.

**Peer Culture Perspective.** As a sociocultural theorist, Corsaro (1985, 1988, 1997, 2003) understands the importance of context. He developed a theory of interpretive reproduction to examine children within contexts, particularly schools where children participate together with adults. Corsaro describes interpretive reproduction as being “made up of three types of collective action: (1) children’s creative appropriation of information and knowledge from the adult world; (2) children’s production and participation in a series of peer cultures; and (3) children’s contribution to the reproduction and extension of the adult culture” (1997, p. 41). Through interpretive reproduction, Corsaro views children as active contributors and constructors of the adult
world who make sense of this through interpretation and incorporation within their peer cultures.

Corsaro (1985) developed the concept of peer culture during his extensive ethnography of children’s daily lives in school. His perspective of examining children’s peer culture was significantly different than the developmental focuses at the time that generally described young children as primarily egocentric and relatively incompetent in developing friendships (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al., 1988). He defines peer culture as “common activities and routines, artifacts, values, concerns and attitudes” (p. 171). Similarly, school culture can be defined as, “a common set of activities or routines, values, concerns and attitudes constructed and communicated about and in a particular school setting by the classroom participants” (Fernie et al., 1988, p. 137). People construct peer cultures and school cultures within classroom contexts; however peer cultures are distinctive from school culture and sometimes even in opposition to the school culture (Elgas, 2003; Elgas, et al., 1988; Fernie et al., 1988). Corsaro (1985) structured his analysis of aspects of children’s peer cultures into three main categories: values and concerns, behavioral routines, and conception and reaction to adult rules. He emphasizes, “The majority of elements of peer culture originate from children’s perceptions of and reactions to, the adult world” (p. 172). I will describe each category while providing support, connections, and sometimes contrasts from studies of children’s peer cultures, especially aspects that connect to children’s engagement in superhero play. Much of this support will come from the various focuses of children’s peer culture from another
Longitudinal ethnography of the daily life of a preschool that built upon Corsaro’s peer culture concept (Kantor & Fernie, 2003).

Values and concerns is a designated category of peer culture. It includes four primary components: (1) social participation and protection of interactive space, (2) concern for physical welfare of playmates, (3) concern with physical size – being big, and (4) themes in spontaneous fantasy (Corsaro, 1985). Corsaro found in the peer cultures he studied that children are very social and interested in maintaining participation within their peer groups. He found these social interactions were often fragile as children were learning how to negotiate and problem-solve. As a result, interactions might dissolve quickly. Thus, he found that children try to maintain these interactions through the “protection of interactive space” (p. 122). Children will sometimes use phrases such as, “you’re not my friend,” not to be mean, as it is often perceived from adult perspectives, but to protect the social interaction. Children have used superhero capes as to serve as a marker of inclusion in the peer culture, and thus also as a way to exclude by protecting their space (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al, 1988). In this study, in order to enter the peer culture, the children determined a cape was needed. This may have been because there were a limited number of capes, thus keeping the possible number of children involved in the play low (i.e. the more children involved, the harder it becomes to maintain play and social interaction).

Another big concern in the peer culture world of the preschool is physical size. Children often try to be bigger than adults and frequently use the climbers and other places where they can be higher than adults (Corsaro, 1985, 2003; Elgas, 2003; Elgas et
al, 1988; Fernie et al, 1988). These places are also difficult for adults to access due to their larger size and height. Corsaro also found fantasy play themes such as lost-found, danger-rescue, and death-rebirth, were common within the peer culture, and thus represented issues that were important to the children. These are similar to pretense play themes in the developmental perspective (Garvey, 1990).

Behavioral routines of peer culture include children’s humor, children’s threats and insults, and approach-avoidance routines (Corsaro, 1985). Humor, threats and insults are often made in direct reaction to the adult world. Jokes are an important way for the peer culture to share laughter and joy. Threats and insults are used to both protect interactive space and to keep their world separate from the adult world. Approach-avoidance routines are often related to the fantasy play themes, such as danger-rescue, and are used by the peer culture to gain control of their lives as they explore danger, fears, and concerns together as a group.

The final category of peer culture is conception and reaction to adult rules (Corsaro, 1985). Goffman (1961, p. 189, as cited in Corsaro, 1985) created a term “secondary adjustments,” which refers to any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organization employs unauthorized means, or obtains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization’s assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be…secondary adjustments represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and self that were taken for granted by him by the institution (p. 254).
Corsaro adopted this concept and extended the application of secondary adjustments by the individual to the group level of the peer culture. He found peer culture groups use four primary rules of school culture where the peer cultures makes secondary adjustment: rules about location of materials, cleaning up, rules against the use of guns and ‘bad’ language. Peer culture groups often move items from one location to another or conceal small items they brought from home in their pockets while showing their peers outside the purview of the teachers. In terms of guns, at the preschool he was conducting his ethnography, guns real and pretend, were prohibited. The peer culture groups found other ways to “make-do” by creating guns while “avoiding detection” (p. 259), which is an important feature of all secondary adjustments.

Kantor and Fernie’s (2003) longitudinal ethnographic study found some other salient aspects of peer culture that build upon Corsaro’s (1985, 2003) perspective. Corsaro studied general peer culture at the classroom level, while peer culture groups, including both regular and semi-regular members, were found within the larger classroom peer culture (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al., 1988). Peer culture groups were determined based on ritualistic practices the groups of peers created during their daily lives in the preschool. The peer culture group saw themselves differently from adults; they participated together to have control while playing together in shared activities. For example, objects and artifacts such as sticks were used within these localized peer culture groups to show affiliation and group membership (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al., 1988; Kantor et al., 1989), and as mentioned, superhero capes were a requirement to enter and access the peer culture. Capes could be considered related to interest in the superhero play
theme, however, the capes in the peer culture group were determined to be important socially rather than thematically (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al, 1988).

Through Corsaro’s (1985) analysis of children’s peer culture, we can see there are many aspects that are oppositional to the school culture (Elgas, 2003; Elgas, et al., 1988; Fernie et al., 1988). However, several studies have supported the intersection of peer cultures and school cultures as a place where each culture’s values, beliefs, and concerns can be negotiated. For example, circle time is a routine school culture activity in many early childhood settings. Kantor et al. (1989) found that children brought their own peer culture interests, including superhero play themes, to circle time. However, these researchers found their original conception of circle time as a school culture event was limited. They found it was actually a site for the intersection of peer cultures and school cultures, thus providing an opportunity for children to bring their own interests and concerns. Further, it was also a time where the teachers and children could share information about interests of the peer culture, including superheroes, television series, and other popular culture information. As mentioned earlier, this intersection was an important way for children to access this popular culture knowledge that some children did not have access to due to limitations imposed by their families about watching television. At circle time, dismissal of students is also an important transition that the school culture values and sometimes has concerns about to ensure a smooth and orderly procedure from one activity to the next. From a peer culture perspective, dismissal may be considered as an unnecessary time to wait before getting to play. In this same study, while the teacher chose to dismiss the children by pretending they were rocks, the
children brought their interest in identifying with superheroes by saying they were certain characters such as “She-Ra” “He-Man” and “Batman” instead of rocks. The teacher accommodated this interest by dismissing them by their chosen superhero character (Fernie et al., 1988). As discussed, objects and artifacts are an important aspect of children’s peer cultures. Through allowing children to use red rhythm sticks inside, instead of the jagged sticks from outside, and incorporating the creation of capes as an art activity, these are other ways the school culture and peer culture can intersect (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al, 1988; Fernie et al., 1988). Thus, the intersection of the peer culture and school culture provides a space for the negotiation and intersection of different values, attitudes, beliefs, and concerns from multiple perspectives.

A peer culture perspective affords the opportunity to examine superhero play very differently than the developmental perspective. The peer culture perspective directly connects to understanding children’s perspectives, which differs from the teacher and adult perspective emphasized in the developmental perspective. Additionally, the peer culture perspective allows analysis at the local contexts of peer and school culture groups, including peer culture groups within a classroom (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al, 1988; Fernie et al, 1988; Kantor & Fernie, 2003), instead of the individual level.

Sociopolitical Perspective

Diane Levin and Nancy Carlsson-Paige are very concerned about children’s play in relationship to the media, and have written extensively about war, weapon, and superhero play from a multiple perspectives, including a developmental, sociopolitical, teacher and child (1995; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin, 1998a, 1998b,
2003a, 2003b). Their developmental perspective was previously described within the developmental perspective section. As stated, they believe superhero, war, and weapon play has important developmental benefits including helping children to express themselves through the violence they’ve observed in their own lives or through the media and providing children with feelings of power and strength. Thus, they argue that children should be allowed to play this type of play. However, they acknowledge teachers’ feelings and concerns and provide significant amounts of advice to teachers about how to address these issues in the classroom in all of their writings.

From a sociopolitical perspective, however, they believe adults need to become politically involved to combat the amount and kinds of media violence children are exposed to in their daily lives (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin, 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995). To take action against media violence, Levin (1998b) argues that teachers need to talk with children to understand their thoughts and feelings and to help them to engage in critical conversations about violence in their play and in their lives. Further, she advocates for both parents and teachers to become familiar with the shows the children watch to assist in these conversations. Furthermore, children can take action themselves by writing letters to toy manufacturers and television producers expressing their own thoughts and concerns. Teachers and parents can assist children to plan what they watch on television and to make critical choices of programs based on informative decisions. Importantly, she neither believes nor advocates that parents and teachers should just eliminate television or related toys from their lives, thus she is not placing the blame on parents for purchasing
or allowing their children to watch the television series she has concerns with. Rather, she believes parents and teachers can use their heightened knowledge and awareness of the media to address their concerns directly with the television production companies and broadcasters, and the toy manufacturers and distributors.

This perspective focuses on political issues in a sociocultural context, specifically the media. In this case, examining how to take action against the media as well as how to assist children to take action for themselves. While this perspective alone, doesn’t necessarily limit possible questions, the researchers (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin 1998a, 1998b, 2003a, 2003b; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995) are limiting this perspective by positioning the media as negative. In some ways, as will be shown in the following perspective, they place children in a position of not having power, meaning the media has power and the children are powerless unless teachers and adults help them to take action. This difference in perspective will become clearer in an analysis of Foucault’s (1980) perspective.

Poststructural Perspectives

Poststructural perspectives are not antithetical to developmental or sociocultural perspectives, rather a poststructural perspective is a lens that opens up possibilities for critical conversation about issues such as gender, race, class, discourse, and power in ways that haven’t been possible in other perspectives. According to poststructural theory, “the structures and processes of the social world are recognised as having a material force, a capacity to constrain, to shape, to coerce, as well as to potentiate individual action” (Davies, 2003, xii). Accordingly, individuals both position and are positioned
with the discursive practices of a given society. Building upon the sociocultural perspective, where people are seen as constructors or meaning-makers, the poststructural perspective expands upon this to focus on how structures in a society, such as institutions (Foucault, 1980) and societal constructions of social norms and behaviors (Davies, 2003) also contribute meaning and thus positions people in dialogic relationships (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 1997). I believe this lens is a useful for examining aspects of children’s lives, including superhero play that are often under-examined and possibly ignored, including gender and power.

*Feminist Poststructural.* From a feminist poststructural perspective, we can examine superhero play in connection to gender, in ways we have not been able to from other perspectives except in relation to statistics. The poststructural perspective is a lens that focuses on gender and concepts of masculinity and femininity as parts of the structures constructed in a given society (Davies 2003; McMurray, 1994). In our society, gender tends to be placed in a binary between male and female (Davies, 2003). The developmental perspective tends to focus on this binary, such as boys play superheroes more than girls. Positioning is also central concept of poststructural theory. Positions such as, masculine and feminine, student and teacher, mother and father, are connected to the societal discourse. While these are listed as binaries, in the poststructural perspective, these concepts are not seen in a dualistic nature. According to Davies these positions may or may not be available to a person based gender, class, and ethnicity.

Individuals (1) take up the various positionings made available to them as their own (which has come to signify in the modern conception of the individual, *who*
they are, or who they take themselves to be or are taken to be), and (2) resist the positionings they do not want (and often blame others for them) (Fernie, Davies, Kantor & McMurray, 1993, p. 98).

Children are positioned through interactions with others in their everyday lives. Positions and identities are fluid and dynamic, however. McMurray (1994) contends gender positionings are related to issues of power and domination. MacNaughton (1996) states, “children have agency in how they learn and practice gender and can resist and/or reconstitute those understandings and practices required of them by adults, other children, or the toy industry” (p. 21). Therefore while adults, peers, and the media, as described earlier in the developmental perspective, influence children’s construction of their identity and gender, they do not determine it. For example, in the peer culture section, an example was provided about how at circle a teacher incorporated the children’s interest in superheroes by changing the scenario of the children being rocks to dismissing the children by their chosen superhero name. Using a poststructural perspective, Davies brought a whole new dimension to the circle time routine (Fernie et al, 1993). According to Davies, the intersection of the peer and school culture can be examined as positions in which the teacher and students are positioning themselves in relationship to each other. In the scenario, there was one girl, Lisa, who asked to be dismissed as “Batman.” From the peer culture perspective, this position was analyzed as a way of expressing her interest in superheroes. From a poststructural perspective, however, Lisa’s choice of “Batman” can be examined as a gender positioning. Through making this choice along with her participation in the all male superhero group as the only girl, she was positioning herself
against the female gender discourse prescribed by society. Without a poststructural lens,
this gendered positioning may have gone unnoticed. Other gender positionings were
examined in this same study. For example, while participating in a series of shootings
back and forth, Lisa was referred to as “Banglady” by one of the boys (Fernie et al.,
1993, p. 104). However, in the peer culture, the leader Bob stated they were playing
“gunermen” (p. 103). Lisa did not accept this gendered positioning from her peer and
insisted, “I’m a gunnerman” (p. 104). “Lacking a multiple perspective, one is likely to
underestimate the extent to which the children take up positions in classroom discourse
that simultaneously express multiple stances, and thus, to miss part of the richness of
their social accomplishments in becoming a person” (Fernie et al., 1993, p. 101).

In another study, examining gender and superhero play, Marsh (2000) argues that
girls have not engaged in superhero play as frequently as boys due to the stereotypical
portrayal of female characters. The female characters, like the male characters, are
represented as either good or evil. She contends that the good female characters are
portrayed as oversexualized and brave, but never as brave as the male characters. The evil
characters are desexualized and highly unattractive. Therefore, girls are not drawn to
engage in this play because they do not see the benefits of engagement through
stereotypical representations of females. To examine superhero play and gender within
the classroom, Marsh (2000) constructed a Batman/Batwoman Headquarters. She created
positive portrayals of the female characters. In addition, the class watched a Batman
movie so all of the children were familiar with the discourse connected to
Batman/Batwoman play. The play center incorporated many literacy materials including
Batman/Batwoman diaries, comic books, and other related materials. She found that these changes increased girls’ involvement in superhero play.

Seiter (1999) examined positionings in relationship to class and the professional early childhood discourse by contrasting two different early childhood professionals’, a Montessori teacher and a family care provider, perceptions and use of popular culture. According to the middle-class discourse of the early childhood profession, having television in an early childhood setting is equivalent with low quality. Similarly, the middle-class discourse prescribes to the developmental perspective that believes television has a negative impact on development. Additionally, the early childhood discourse is also feminist and as described earlier, generally perceives male violence negatively (Holland, 2003). The Montessori teacher positioned herself within this discourse not just within her professional life, but in her personal life as well. She didn’t watch television and had limited knowledge of the popular culture interests the children bring to school. Further, she didn’t allow the boys to wear superhero clothing, however the girls were allowed to wear character clothes such as from Disney movies.

Alternatively, the family care provider was very knowledgeable about the television and media interests of the children in her care. The children were allowed to wear whatever they want and they can bring their own toys from home, except for toy guns or knives. She supported their popular culture interests by having character days where they dressed up and watched different programs. Interestingly, both girls and boys in the family care provider’s program, showed interest in both Power Rangers and dolls, while the family care provider acknowledged that parents of many of the boys would not support this
interest in dolls. Thus, the family care provider may be positioning herself against the middle-class early childhood professional discourse, or she may not have access to this position due to class (Davies, 2003), or she may be positioning herself in an altogether different discourse. Regardless of the structure she may positioning herself with or against, her position as a care provider is providing a context supportive of multiple gender positionings by children as well as different positionings as teacher and student (caregiver and child).

Marsh (2002) also believes the middle-class discourse limits discussions about the relationships of the media and children. In response to Levin and Rosenquest’s (2001) concerns about the commercialization of electronic toys for children, she argues that this perspective positions young children as incompetent and passive recipients of media culture. Additionally, she feels this position reflects the dominant middle-class discourse and values and projects a sense of “moral panic” (Cohen, 1987, as cited in Marsh, 2002, p. 132) about the media in relationship to children. Further, through examining literacy, class, and home/school relationships, Marsh (2003) believes that schools ascribe to the middle-class discourse, which as noted previously, places popular culture texts as negative and low quality. Many children are interested in these popular texts such as superheroes, however, and many homes provided opportunities for these texts. She notes that the literacy practices for children from their homes are often connected to popular culture. However, schools position this literacy as negative and of little value, thus also placing children’s literacy knowledge in a way as deficient as they are not ascribing to the “right” literacy discourse. Thus, from a poststructural perspective we have a very
different lens to examine the media, gender, students, teachers, as well as discourses, such as dominant middle-class discourse that prescribes certain positions about the media and the early childhood professional. This concept of discourse is similar to Brahmin’s concept of speech genre (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003).

Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s theoretical perspective includes many useful concepts to explore in relationship to superhero play, including: speech genre, heteroglossia, dialogic communities, and concepts of voice and identity. As mentioned, speech genre can be seen in relation to discourse as described by Davies (2003). Speech genre, as similar to discourse, is not something that occurs on an individual basis. Bakhtin doesn’t see speech as free, rather speech genres are constructed and structured in social discourse and people as speakers position themselves through their utterances in relation to the speech genre. According to Bakhtin, however, everybody holds a “positionality – a particular world view” (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p. 77), which are developed through these positionings in speech genres. Bakhtin describes two kinds of speech genres – primary and secondary (Holloway & Kneale, 2000). Primary speech genres are located in everyday speech. Secondary speech genres are located in cultural texts such as books, movies, plays, television shows, and cartoons. Thus, the Power Rangers is a secondary speech genre available to children, and in their play in the primary speech genre they may use utterances from the show in various positions with their peers.

Heteroglossia is defined as “many-languagedness” (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p. 72) or “multi-voicedness” (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 283). Heteroglossia is both about choice and constraints (Cazden, 1992). People have choice related to the utterances they
speak that come from the multiple positions or stances they can take. A good example is in relation to being a peer and a student in a classroom (Cazden, 1992). A child in the classroom can make one of several choices. They can position themselves as a good peer, meaning going along with the peer culture world that is in opposition to the school culture. Or, vice versa, they can position themselves as a good student with the school culture and risk being ostracized by the peer culture. However, from a poststructural perspective, positions do not have to be one or the other. Thus, according to Cazden (1992), using a heteroglossic utterance the child can position themselves as both a good student and a good peer. The ability to work with the multivoicedness, heteroglossia, of the peer and school culture is considered as “communicative competence” (p. 197). “Just as the social world is characterized by the enduring, inevitable struggle among the many social languages of heteroglossia, so too is the child’s playground the field of an intense, ongoing interaction among many unmerged voices” (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 281-282).

Dyson (1994) considers children’s worlds as living within the official and the unofficial, both of which correspond with Corsaro’s conceptions of school and peer cultures. Dyson was influenced by Bakhtin’s notion of dialogic communities. Dialogic communities represent the intersections of the official and unofficial worlds and the social constructions that occur. These communities are composed of different individuals with different histories and cultures that influence their own social constructions of the world, including their identity. Identity is linked to another concept of Bakhtin’s (1981) is the “ideological becoming of a human being” (p. 341). “In the Bakhtinian view,
ideological becoming refers to a person’s efforts to make a discourse initially received from others’ own, and to resist fully coinciding with others’ discourse” (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 282). This ideological becoming is where an individual develops his/her own voice and identity. In early childhood, this search for voice and identity is very difficult due to the positioning of children by the adult discourse. As such, play is an important site for the development of the child’s own voice through both appropriation and resistance. Superhero play may be an important site to analyze how children are both positioning themselves and resisting the adult discourse.

Play affords children the necessary distance or otherness from which to objectify and comment upon adult spheres of life; and second is that play can be structured so that it self-consciously challenges the property of, or pokes fun at, adult forms of discourse and behavior (p. 283).

Through this, the child is engaging in “double-voiced speech” where “a speaker makes use of another’s discourse such that two intentions or speech centres are present in the discourse” (Duncan & Tarulli, p. 285). An example is a preschooler who takes on an adult’s voice and speech during play, such as a child exaggerating, “Please pass the corn, dahhhling” during a family style lunch at a child care center. In this example, the child is incorporating the adult voice with her own and becoming, “double-voiced.” Moreover, the adult discourse is “dialogized” by “rendering a possibility among other possibilities” (Dyson, 1997) by denying its authoritative discourse (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). In Dyson’s (1997) study of popular culture and literacy in the classroom, the predominant genre of superhero stories were written by males for male characters. Two female
students, Tina and Holly, however constructed their own renderings of superhero stories, thus, changing the possibilities of superhero stories and contributing a new voice. This was easier for Holly than for Tina due to their own positionings both by themselves and by other students. However, it illustrates that people cannot just say this is my voice and my identity and have it happen as they plan it to.

Dyson (1994, 1996, 1997) also found by incorporating her student’s interests in superheroes through their writing, they were also able to make connections to societal constructions of racism, sexism, and classism and how these were being constructed in their classroom too. She utilized these stories with the children to help them recognize and transform their conceptions about issues of power and gender. Within their stories, she found that the students frequently included and excluded based on racial and gender stereotypes. Using a Bakhtinian lens, she utilized their stories as a means to examine, name, and critique and these constructions within their stories, their classroom, and society. People exist in social relationships and these concepts of voice, positions, heteroglossia, and dialogic communities, particularly highlight the complexities of everyday lives in classrooms and in play.

Other than Dyson’s (1994, 1996, 1997) work with superheroes and popular culture in an early elementary classroom, there is very little work using Bakhtin’s concepts in early childhood at all. However, I think this perspective holds many possibilities. The concept of heteroglossia, multi-voicedness, expands upon and makes more complex the concept of intersubjectivity from a sociocultural perspective (Goncu, 1998). Superhero play, or any pretense play, is the site of multivoiced interaction and
negotiation among the players, but also in relation to adult discourse (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003) and media discourse. This concept alone would be very interesting to examine in relation to superhero play. Further, superhero play can be examined as a secondary speech genre (Holloway & Kneale, 2000). Additionally, a Bakhtinian perspective affords the opportunity to examine and analyze dialogue and language during play as people interact with each other and the multi-voicedness of play. The concept of double-voiced could occur and be examined in superhero play. Such double-voiced situations possibilities may occur through the child’s voice and the superhero voice from the media; the child’s voice and a peer’s voice in peer relationships; the child’s voice and the school’s voice through teachers and other adults; and the child’s voice and the families’ voice. Perhaps there is a possible site for a triple voice with an intersection of self, home, and school? Finally, superhero play could be examined as a site for children as positioning themselves against the adult authoritative discourse. I see many possibilities through this lens to learn more about superhero play that have not been possible through other lenses, including the sociocultural perspective. Through examining language, discourse, and positionings, diversity can become visible through a poststructural lens. I don’t believe diversity is necessarily ignored in the other perspectives, it is just not as visible or is viewed differently, such as the negative “at-risk” labels that are typically connected to diversity in a developmental perspective focused middle-class discourses. As a perspective, however, the feminist poststructural and Bakhtinian perspectives do not allow a lens to focus on developmental benefits of superhero play. I also do not think it provides a strong lens to examine issues of power and control, which I think are primary
issues to explore in a study of superhero play. However, a Foucauldian perspective allows this focus.

Foucault. I believe there are several of Foucault’s concepts that can provide another perspective for understanding this “under-researched” and “under-theorized” topic (Holland, 2003), including his ideas about power, discourse, and human agency. Power is often seen as dualistic, meaning someone has power and someone does not (Mills, 2003). As such, power is often seen as negative because it is perceived as someone taking advantage of someone else. However, Foucault did not see power in as either being in a dualistic relationship or as being positive or negative. For Foucault, power is seen as dialectical.

Perhaps it is this analysis of power which has most profoundly influenced political thinking, so that rather than simply thinking of power as an imposition of the will of one individual on another, or one group on another, we can see power as a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout a society and enacted at every moment of interaction (Mills, 2003, p. 30).

Thus, people are seen as possessing power and everyday interactions represent performances of power. Power is not a thing to possess or achieve; it is an action. Power is a “strategy, something which someone does or performs in a particular context” (p. 35). Power, while seen as something that can be performed and be productive for people, Foucault also sees the possibility of power also being constraining. However, even with constraints he felt that power affords possibilities (Mills, 2003). Thus, Foucault is interested in how power is played out in a given context.
Foucault’s bottom-up model of power, that is his focus on the way power relations permeate all relations within a society, enables an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested, and allows an analysis which focuses on individuals as active subjects, as agents rather than as passive dupes (Mills, 2003, p. 34).

Seeing humans as agents is similar to concepts from a sociocultural perspective where people are considered as constructors of their own reality and as meaning-makers. Foucault believes, like sociocultural theorists, that people do not construct meaning in isolation, thus humans as agents exist within the possibilities and constraints of their constructed reality. They are not the sole constructors of reality, nor are they completely subjected to the reality that is being prescribed by a particular discourse. “Foucault theorizes us as neither entirely autonomous nor entirely enslaved. We are not individual (or preplanned group) originators of a discourse, nor are we solely constituted or determined by the discourse” (Sawicki, 1991, as cited in Cannella, 1999, p. 42).

Various theorists use the concept of discourse, which connotes certain meanings based on the point of view. According to Jones and Brown (2001), Foucault’s “theory of discourse provides us with an alternative way(s) of looking at the minutiae of the classroom and in so doing makes a space for conceptualizing changes within inequitable structural arrangements” (p. 714). Foucault has his own particular perspective about discourse in relation to humans as agents and in relationship to power. He believes that discourse is more than just how people think or how it is a way people construct meaning. Discourse becomes part of peoples’ conscious and subconscious ways of being
Discourses, because they are a part of a relationship of power, can be changed however. Cannella (1999) argues that “all discourses are dangerous” if they are not examined (p. 38).

Recently, there has been an increase in studies from a Foucauldian perspective in early childhood, which helps to inform a study of superhero play as phenomena in early childhood. For example, Orellana (1994) in a study of children’s bilingual language use at home and school found that bilingual children used the language of superhero play only when they spoke in English, but not in their first language Spanish. She believes that superhero play and popular culture can be used to support children in learning the language of that culture. However, she also found that the children associated English as a language of power, because of the power superheroes (who spoke English) represent to the children. Therefore, while it is a beneficial way to connect children’s interests in superheroes towards learning the language, it also important to examine how this power connection plays out in relation to children maintaining and valuing their first language and their identity as bilingual. She did not specifically examine this relationship, however.

Jones (2001) describes a teacher’s examination of her own practice around gunplay through a poststructural lens, including some of Foucault’s ideas about discourse. She particularly questioned her stance on banning gunplay including any constructions together with her feminist and child-centered beliefs. In another study, Jones and Brown (2001) examined relationships of power and identity in the early childhood classroom. “When playing, the children themselves are playing with notions of
identity which in turns plays with concepts of power and power relations” (p. 718). They analyzed a play scenario between children examining how children use power in discursive relationships. Additionally, they analyzed a journal entry from a classroom teacher in which the teacher interrupts a child in superhero play, which she typically allows, however stopped it in this instance when she felt it was becoming too active. She has the boy come with her to listen to the story “The Paper Bag Princess,” which depicts a young girl from a different gender position than the dominant discourse. The researchers analyze this entry using a Foucauldian perspective which allowed them to question issues of the middle-class feminist discourse, identity positionings in terms of masculinity and femininity, and as well as positionings of teacher and student.

Using Foucault’s (1980) concepts and ideas provides us with additional ways to analyze superhero play using a poststructural perspective. As shown, we can examine positionings (Davies, 2003) looking more closely at issues of power. Additionally, based on Foucault’s (1980, Mills, 2003) interest in institutions and discourse, I believe he would be very interested in the policies, both official and unofficial, of banning or holding “zero tolerance” for superhero play (Holland, 2003). Further, as others have examined, he would be interested in how teachers positioning themselves within and against the middle-class early childhood discourse related to such practices as incorporation of popular culture within early childhood settings. Thus, this perspective builds upon Davies (2003) and Bakhtin’s (1981) perspectives. Overall, a poststructural lens allows us to ask questions that challenge and question dominant discourses and practices. I think this lens is particularly useful to build upon a sociocultural perspective.
that has delved deep into understanding a given phenomena, such as superhero play, and then apply an additional perspective closely examining and questioning the findings and understandings of the sociocultural perspective. I don’t think this lens can be used without another, since it is really questioning what is occurring based on other information from other perspectives. Thus, it really is a lens to be used within a multiple perspective analysis.

Within this ethnographic study, I use multiple perspectives to more deeply understand the phenomenon of superhero play. Primarily, I examine the perspectives of people focusing primarily on the children’s and the teachers’ perspectives. While families’ perspectives are very important and as shown, underexamined, they are beyond the scope of this particular study. Additionally, a combination of theoretical perspectives will inform the multiple meanings and possibilities within my data. The sociocultural perspective predominantly informs me, including Corsaro’s (1985) peer culture theory and Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural perspective. Additionally, the poststructural theories described above provide a useful lens to question and add another “reading” to the data and findings. Using multiple lenses within an ethnographic study will provide a rich understanding of superhero play.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study is situated in the interpretive tradition of sociocultural research using ethnography as a way to understand superhero play in context from the perspective of the children and teachers. In this chapter I present the methodology used to understand more about superhero play in an early childhood classroom. I explain how ethnography provided a way to understand the phenomenon contextually and the ability to interpret findings based on the research questions. I present the context of the study including the research site, participants, entry to site, and my role as a researcher throughout the study. I also present the data collection and analysis methods used within the study following with a discussion of issues of trustworthiness and fidelity within the study.

These are the research questions guiding this study.

- How is superhero play an aspect of the school culture?
- What are the teachers’ perspectives of superhero play?
- How is superhero play an aspect of children’s peer culture life?
- What are the children’s perspectives of superhero play
- What is the relationship of superhero play as an aspect of peer culture to the school culture context?
- How do the teachers and children’s perspectives intersect?
- How do multiple theoretical perspectives interpret and inform our understanding of the phenomenon of superhero play?
The questions of this research study highlight the need to understand superhero play from the perspective of the people involved in their daily experiences. In order to accomplish this as a researcher, I needed to become involved in the daily lives of the participants. Ethnography is the most appropriate research perspective to uncover the meanings of superhero play and the perspectives of the participants involved. The following describes ethnography, my role as a researcher in the study, data collection methods, and data analysis.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography is a way of understanding people’s lived experiences in their everyday contexts. It is a way to understand local cultures, how culture is constructed, the common and different meanings that various participants construct for particular aspects of a culture and how people may contest and resist aspects of the culture that are put upon them (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Ethnography, as a part of an interpretive research perspective, focuses on understanding the “invisibility of everyday life” and to “make the familiar strange” (Erickson, 1986, p.121). “An interpretive approach thus takes as its focus of inquiry the meaning of human action in cultural context” (Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992, p. 6).

Ethnographers and interpretive researchers believe that people construct knowledge and reality within given contexts. For young children, their primary interactions and therefore sites in which they construct their reality are their homes,
schools (if they attend, since some young children do not attend a school setting), child care settings, neighborhoods, and other community settings such as churches. Within children’s peer cultures, children construct knowledge based upon the children’s own local knowledge, beliefs, and values (Corsaro, 1985; 2003). Therefore, I see children as active participants in the construction of meaning, knowledge, and reality. Adults do not give children knowledge or a given reality; children construct knowledge in local contexts, such as the classroom and with their localized peer culture contexts within the classroom. I believe children create knowledge within and across all of these different contexts. Since children, like adults, exist within these multiple realities, as they interact together in order to create meaning together they experience intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity requires consistent negotiation between the people interacting, in this case, children.

Ethnographers are trying to understand the emic, or insider’s view (Wolcott, 1999). Some argue that researchers can never get the emic or insider view and will always have the etic, or outsider view. Wolcott (1999) argues, however, that there are multiple insider views and as such, “every view is a way of seeing, not the way” (p. 137). Geertz (1983) has borrowed Kohut’s concepts of “experience-near” and “experience-far” to explore the complexities of the researcher and the researched in terms of insider and outsider perspectives. “Experience-near” gets at the ideas and concepts from the insider’s point of view, while “experience-far” places these concepts in a theoretical frame “to capture the general features of social life” (p. 58).
My goals for this study is to get as close to the experience for the participants and understand the insiders’ view, the children’s perspectives, on superhero play, and to understand it “experience-distance” or multiple theoretical perspectives to better understand superhero play (Geertz, 1983). Superhero play is an aspect of the children’s constructed peer culture (Corsaro, 1985). Ethnography provides the opportunity to understand the children’s perspectives, how they create their own peer culture, and the meanings the children have about their culture. In order to understand children’s perspectives, Gaskins et al., (1992) contend that researchers need to: (1) study children in their own contexts; (2) understand that children create meaning in “collective cultural routines and practices” and these routines and practices need to be studied (p. 11); and (3) understand that “language is the key to understanding meaning” and that language is essential in the creation of meaning and reality by people within cultural contexts (p. 13). These three contentions guide my primary views as a researcher of young children’s peer cultures. The theoretical framework of children’s peer cultures, in my view, is an important way to get at the “inside” perspective of the children’s lives (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995). Fine and Sandstrom (1998) believe children have knowledge about their own lives and their lives are important and worth knowing more about from their perspective and “to see the world through their eyes” (p. 12).

The role of researchers is to seek to understand these constructions through studying people within natural contexts and situations (Erickson, 1986). As a researcher in search of understanding, the researcher needs to live within the participant’s contexts and settings to build a relationship with the participant in order to understand the given
phenomena from the participant’s perspective. In order to understand people’s lives in context, ethnography relies upon prolonged engagement in the site, participant observation, and interviews with the participants to understand the specific cultural context (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Spradley, 1980). In this study, I was a participant observer for almost one year from January 2005 through November 2005. Ethnography relies on interpretation on the part of the researcher based upon the observations, interviews, and other related data.

I believe that many young children have an interest in and knowledge about superheroes. I believe that the children bring this interest to their local contexts, such as the classroom, and together the children interested in superheroes, construct their own local meanings and interpretations in their peer culture context. Young children’s knowledge of superheroes is also acquired through interactions with and appropriation of media including television shows, popular culture toys, and movies (Arthur, 2001; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Marsh, 2003; Seiter, 1999), however, I also believe that some children also have an interest in superheroes that may have minimal exposure to these aspects of popular culture. Therefore, I believe that is it important to understand how children construct local meanings about superheroes and superhero play in their peer culture groups.

In order to understand more about children’s interest in superheroes and superhero play, I needed to enter a context that had children involved in such activities. I believe that preschool children across many contexts have interests in superheroes, however, I also know that some preschool contexts ban or limit this interest, particularly
through superhero play. Therefore, I needed to find a site that allowed superhero play to happen in the classroom context to understand superhero play.

The research site was selected because superhero play has been a phenomenon at the school over many years and there is a group of children who at the time of the study’s planning and approval, were currently and actively engaging in superhero play. The teachers are supportive of this type of play and have been studying this recurring phenomenon over time, which was another reason in support of this site as an ideal venue. This makes this setting unique in comparison to many other preschool classrooms where this type of play is banned, discouraged, or transformed (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Additionally, I had already developed a relationship with the program coordinator and the two classroom teachers through previous coursework and other educational experiences at the university. The teachers and program coordinator were open and interested in having the study take place in their classroom. The children and families at the site were also open to having their children participate in a variety of research studies, including qualitative research, as part of being a member of a laboratory school setting. In the following sections I describe the context of the research site, including the school, classroom, curriculum, teachers, and children.

Research Site and Participants

Research Site

This study took place in the preschool classroom in a laboratory classroom of a large Midwestern University. The classroom is part of the laboratory school that has an infant/toddler and a preschool classroom. The infant/toddler classroom has a maximum of
The school is a part of the College of Human Ecology and the classrooms are used as a site for observations for early childhood courses, as a site for students to do practicum experiences, student teaching (M.Ed. graduate students), and sometimes for volunteers. The school is also a research site for various research studies from number of disciplines including education, psychology, and cognitive science. Researchers include professional researchers, professors, Ph.D. candidates, graduate students, and undergraduate students. As it is a laboratory school it has a dual purpose of providing excellent educational programming for the children and their families together with serving as a site for University students to learn about child development and early childhood education.

Curriculum

The philosophy of the school is based on the theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, Erickson, John Dewey, and the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The teachers and the director have visited Reggio Emilia several times, including a trip in to the Crossing Boundaries conference in Reggio Emilia, Italy in February 2004 that I also attended. Because of their own histories as well as the influence of Reggio Emilia and other progressive philosophies, the teachers view the children as unique, strong, competent, and capable. The teachers plan the curriculum to be open and available to the children throughout the day. Many opportunities are repeated and expanded upon throughout a
week or longer depending on the interests of the children. Thus the schedule provided many opportunities for children to carry out and extend their interests in superhero (and forms of) play.

Daily Schedule

The school is open from 7:30 AM to 5:30 PM, Monday through Friday. The school is open 52 weeks of the year except for University holidays and days for teachers’ professional development. The children arrive and leave at varying times depending on their parents’ schedules. Most children arrive between 7:30 and 9:00 and leave between 4:30 and 5:30 PM.

The schedule below represents an outline of a typical daily schedule, however, this schedule was fluid and changed based on the needs of the children or planned experiences, such as a walking trip around the campus. The day is divided into two similar parts. During the morning, the children arrive, have free play, circle time, free choice activities, outdoor play, lunch, and rest. After rest, the routine repeats with free play, circle time, free choice activities, outdoor play, and dismissal. The afternoon is a more condensed form of the morning routine.
## Preschool Classroom Daily Routine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Scheduled Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:30 – 10:00</td>
<td>Free play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Materials available at tables and the art studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children can eat breakfast/snack when they are hungry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-10:30</td>
<td>Circle Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-11:30</td>
<td>Free choice activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children are encouraged to engage in the planned activities available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children may engage in self-selected activities/play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30 – 12:15</td>
<td>Outdoor Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:15 – 1:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 – 1:15/1:30</td>
<td>Story Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children split up into two groups. One group listens to stories in the Quiet Room. One group listens to stories on the stairs in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15/1:30 – 3:00</td>
<td>Rest Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00 – 4:00</td>
<td>Free play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00 – 4:30</td>
<td>Circle Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30 – 5:00</td>
<td>Free choice activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00 – 5:30</td>
<td>Outdoor Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30</td>
<td>School closes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Daily Routines in Preschool Classroom
Participants

Children. A total of 24 children participated in the study. At any given time there was a maximum of 20 children as this is the capacity of the classroom. The classroom is a multiage group of children between the ages of three to five. The number of children participating varied as some children moved, left the class for the summer, moved on to kindergarten, or moved up from the infant/toddler room to the preschool classroom.

Table 3.2 describes each of the children based on gender, age, ethnicity, family’s country of origin, and language spoken in the home (first and second).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (March 2005)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Family’s Country of Origin</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Second Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tahira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Saudi Arabian</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrianna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>(Australian dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nala</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donovan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lien</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
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<td>4.7</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Race/Heritage</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Language(s)</td>
<td>Additional Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
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<td>---------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
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<td>4.10</td>
<td>Latino-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashanta</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>Chinese-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Moved up to the preschool classroom during the summer of 2005

Table 3.2: Children in the Classroom

*Adults.* The adult participants of the study included the program coordinator, the two lead teachers, and various assistant teachers and practicum students. Across the year, 3 assistant teachers, 14 undergraduate practicum students, and 4 Masters of Education students participated in the study. Table 3.1 describes the two lead teachers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
<th>Kathy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Lead Teacher</td>
<td>Lead Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years at the Preschool</td>
<td>7 (6 as lead teacher)</td>
<td>8 (8 as lead teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Experience</td>
<td>Graduate Associate at the preschool; Substitute teacher. 8 years in ECE at time of study.</td>
<td>17 years in various Early Childhood Education settings (before in current position. 25 years in ECE at time of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>European-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings about Superhero Play (*As emphasized in interviews/conversations – based on data analysis codes)</td>
<td>Supportive Power Part of peer culture Children’s social development Feels challenges about superhero play in a model classroom with student teachers and practicum students</td>
<td>Supportive Power Independence Risk-Taking Children’s emotional development Dislikes gunplay due to personal experiences, but understands and accepts it at a professional level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3: Classroom Teachers

Access and Entry

In December 2004, the Institutional Review Board approved the research study.

In January 2005, the program coordinator sent the Informed Consent forms and information about my study to the families per the program policies (See Appendix B).

All families gave consent for their child to participate in the study. I discussed the study with the teachers and program coordinator prior to the study and they signed consent forms in January 2005. I discussed my study and their possible participation in the study
with the assistant teachers on an individual basis during my first few days in the classroom during the school day. All of the assistant teachers also gave consent to participate. I also discussed the study with the practicum students during their initial seminar. I described my study and their possible role and participation. For all adults I explained the use of the video camera and how they may be on film at different times during children’s play. They all agreed to be videotaped as well (See Appendix B for the adult consent form). Throughout the study different children and adults joined the classroom. When this occurred, I described my study to each new individual adult and the teachers submitted my consent form to the new families. During the day, I discussed my role with the new children, usually during a circle time as the new children usually started in a group. In the next section, I will describe the development of my role as a researcher together with more details on how I shared my study with the children and got their informed consent.

**Researcher’s Role**

In ethnographic studies, the researcher’s role is to become a member of the community as a participant in the context. When working with adults, this role is relatively attainable without too many challenges. However, conducting research, particularly ethnographic research with children, is more challenging in many respects. A primary challenge is the role of the researcher in relationship with the children he or she is studying, particularly due to the general authority adults typically hold over children (Christensen, 2004). Christensen (2004) describes the role of an adult researching children’s perspectives “as an on-going balance between being recognized as an ‘adult’
and at the same time avoiding the preconceived ideas, practices and connotations associated with ‘adulthood’ or specific adult roles such as teacher, member of staff or a parent” (p. 174). Several researchers have described their approaches as researchers studying young children including the role of a “friend” (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988), “least-adult” role (Mandell, 1988), and becoming “Big Bill” (Corsaro, 1985, 2003). As I began the study, I used these previous research studies to guide me. I positioned myself as a person who is interested in their play, and am open and willing to play and engage in their “peer culture” activities if allowed. From the beginning, I took a “reactive approach” and waited for the children to react to me (Corsaro, 1985, 2003). I sat by groups of children and observed, but tried to remain unobtrusive.

Together with the teachers, we developed a plan to differentiate me from other adults in the classroom. We decided I would be a “student,” which is a truthful statement since I am a student I the University and I want to learn about their play. My primary concern in the beginning was to ensure that the teachers would be accepting of these differences in roles, while also being a useful member of the classroom community. Throughout the study I offered information from what I was observing and was often asked to share my perspective on various children during meetings and seminars. There are several children who are receiving specialized services (i.e. occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological counseling) and sometimes the teachers ask me to share my perspective based upon my background and experience in special education. Therefore, I feel that I was able to provide some aspects of reciprocity despite the fact that I provided minimal support in the everyday routines of the classroom.
Defining my Role

During my first day in the classroom, January 3, 2005, the teachers were introducing the new practicum student teachers at their morning circle time. Adults in the classroom are differentiated as “Everyday teachers” and “Someday teachers.” Everyday teachers are there everyday and included the teachers and assistant teachers. Someday teachers are there some of the days and include the practicum student teachers, the Masters of Education students, and any volunteers. Andrea wanted to introduce me at this time too and distinguish me and my role from these typical adult roles. The following represents this introduction through my field notes. Andrea said:

“…and we also have Jeannie. She is not a someday teacher. Nick asked, “Is she a kid?” Andrea asked, “What do you think?” Carlos said, “A girl.” I said, “Yes, I’m a girl.” Andrea said that I would be there on many days and that sometimes I might be writing down notes. I responded that I want to know about what they do in their school and how they play. I said, “Sometimes I’ll watch you play, sometimes I’ll write things down, and sometimes I’ll play with you.” Andrea mentioned, “And sometimes she might have a video camera.” Nala said, “And sometimes a computer.” Andrea and I both said, “Sometimes maybe a computer.” I also said, “If you’re ever wondering, you can always ask me what I’m doing or ask me any questions.”
[Field Notes: January 3, 2005]

Labeling Role as a Student. Differentiating myself from the “someday” and “everyday” teachers was not that clear cut, however. As the children usually referred to the adults by a title, such as “everyday teacher” or “someday teacher,” we decided we needed to use the title “student” to further clarify my role as different from other adults. The following diagram describes specific ways I positioned myself in the classroom separate from the teachers and closer to the children as I became a “student.” These choices, I believe, had a significant impact in the children differentiating me as separate
from the teachers. These included how I positioned myself during circle, lining up for transitions, participation in the lunch routine, my role in play, and differentiating myself from general teacher duties, particularly guidance and discipline.
### Table 3.4: Becoming a Student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Me (as Student)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Circle Time</strong></td>
<td>Sit on carpet area with legs crossed or feet straight out Sometimes will sit on a teachers lap</td>
<td>One teacher leads the group. This rotates. Teachers usually have a child sitting on their lap, based upon who requests this option.</td>
<td>Sit on carpet area with legs crossed. Do not have children sit on my lap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lining Up</strong></td>
<td>Line up behind each other. When walking outside this “plug in” [put their hand on the wall so they will stay near the wall and away from traffic].</td>
<td>The teachers split up into the three different sections of the line. One at the front, middle, end. They stand to the right of the line separate from the children.</td>
<td>I line up in the line, usually toward the end. I “plug in” like the children do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lunch</strong></td>
<td>Children bring their lunch from home in a lunchbox. Before going outside in the morning, they place their lunchboxes on the seat they want to sit at one of three tables. The children put their lunches on a white paper plate.</td>
<td>The teachers split up between the three tables, so there is one at each table. They eat something they have brought from home. They do not use plates</td>
<td>I bring my lunch from home in a lunchbox. I usually, but not always, put my lunch on the chair. I don’t when it seems confusing and the children need to find a spot. On these days I will bring a chair over later. I put my lunch on a paper plate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Play</strong></td>
<td>Children play in activities they chose.</td>
<td>Teachers monitor their play, provide materials, facilitate problem-solving, and/or work on paperwork or other teacher duties.</td>
<td>I observe the children’s play and participate when invited by the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Teacher Roles</strong></td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Monitoring time for plans children make with other children for toys</td>
<td>I generally do not do this. I have on a few occasions, but generally say, “I don’t have a watch,” if asked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taking children into the quiet room (a separate room right off of the classroom. Due licensing requirements, a teacher needs to be in the quiet room). Providing snack preparation and refills</td>
<td>I do not take children in the quiet room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing general discipline and redirection</td>
<td>I do not get the snack materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I do not provide discipline or redirection unless children’s immediate safety is in danger.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4: Becoming a Student
I believe all of these choices had a significant impact on how I was perceived in the classroom, however the most important aspect of my role as a researcher was time. During the first quarter of participant observation (January through March) there were also 10 practicum student teachers in the classroom at various times. In this classroom, practicum students participate two afternoons or mornings per week as part of their field experience in learning to teach. A new group of practicum students begin each quarter. I started my participant observation at the same time this group started. For the children, I and the teachers believe, it was harder to differentiate me from one of “someday teachers” as they are referred to since they are only there on “somedays.” At the end of the quarter, I spent the week during final exams and the vacation week participating in the classroom almost everyday. Afterwards, the next group of practicum students began, with this group only being 5 students. This also made a difference for me over the second quarter (March through May), since there were much fewer adults on any given day.

_Shifting Positionings._ The following chart describes my shifting position over time from January 2005 through November 2005. The chart represents shifts in my positionings in participant observation, how the children perceived my role as a researcher, and my roles in play and superhero play specifically. Below, I describe each time period in chronological order.
### Shifting Positions January 2005 through November 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>View of Researcher Role by Children</th>
<th>Role in Play (other than superhero play)</th>
<th>Role in Superhero Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>January through February 2005</strong></td>
<td>Mostly observation</td>
<td>Generally unsure</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited (some shooting/trapping me), mainly observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generally outside of the children’s group</td>
<td>Some believe me to be a “teacher”; others “student”</td>
<td>Some children invited to play themes connected to kitties/doggies, Lion King (Simba/Nala), or treating me as a “bad guy” by poisoning and “killing me”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Late February through April 2005</strong></td>
<td>Combination of observation/invitation into children’s play</td>
<td>Some shift toward seeing me as distinct from teachers.</td>
<td>More involved in various aspects. Often invited into some form of play as described above</td>
<td>Moderate Involvement (Playing Lego “Transformers” was a shift to seeing me as a participant in superhero play)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>April through May 2005</strong></td>
<td>Mostly invited and participating in children’s play</td>
<td>Children begin to see me as distinct from teachers. A different kind of grown-up One child describes, “You know the student who is fun to play with.”</td>
<td>Minimal (some kitty/doggie). Usually involved in superhero play at this point.</td>
<td>Almost full involvement (“Want to play Justice League?” – is a typical first invitation when I arrive) Becoming “Batgirl”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May 2005 through November 2005</strong></td>
<td>Completely involved and participating in children’s play</td>
<td>Children consider me distinct from the other adults. When I arrive they expect me to play with them.</td>
<td>I am involved and directly connected to the peer group with Donovan, Ron, Brian, and Alan. I play what they are playing.</td>
<td>I primarily play superheroes if the peer group is playing superheroes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5: Shifting Positionings
Initially, on the spectrum of participant observation, I fell somewhere between passive to moderate (Spradley, 1980). Generally, I would observe activities and position myself near interesting play, particularly around superheroes. Additionally, I would also sit in various areas and join children’s play if invited, no matter what type of play. I believe this was very important in establishing my role as a general play partner in the classroom. My initial and primary play activities involved being a kitty or dog and playing with Lion King characters. However, some of these children also rejected my role in their play. For example, I was observing at a table near Adrianna. She approached and said:

"I want you to go away." I said, "What?" to be sure I heard her correctly. She said, "I don't want any teachers here." I said, "But, I'm not a teacher." She said, "Go be by Carlos." She said something else and eventually said, "What are you still doing here?" I told her, "I'm going over there."

[Field Notes Entry: January 13, 2005]

Examples such as this happened off and on during this initial entry into the classroom. During this time, there were two boys whom I would interact with fairly regularly, Nick and Anthony, who frequently played together as a pair. Nick provided my first entry into play connected to superheroes.

Nick was holding a large white thin figure with a bird-like face. It is from one of the Power Rangers shows. He said to me, "This is going to turn into a Megazord." I said, "How?"

Nick - no response
Nick: "It's making a loud noise." [As he does so, he puts it near by ear.]
Me: [I covered my right ear] "It's soo loud."
Nick: laughs
Anthony: laughs
This repeats several times.
[Field Note Entry: January 6, 2005]
However, Nick also was very cautious of my role and positioned me in the role of a
teacher or rejected my presence on several occasions.

Later on, I was sitting beside Nick and Anthony at the block area. He looks at me
and then points to another area of the room. He said, "You don't have to watch us.
We'll be fine over here." I said, "Where should I go?" Nick said, "Go watch her
over there." I left the area at his request.
[Field Note Entry: January 10, 2005]

During the middle period of my participant observation (Late February through
April, 2005), I became much more involved in the children’s play. The following quote is
from a child discussing his play choice at the circle time meeting.

When they were talking about the different ideas, Donovan said, "Me, and Alan,
and Jeannie, we're playing Transformers so if anyone wants to join us they can,
they just have to have a Transformer."
[Field Note Entry: April 14, 2005]

Similar quotes became quite common during this time as the children invited me
into and were interested in continuing to play with me and include me as part of their
play routine as they described it during the circle time routine.

Despite moving into a more distinct shift toward being involved in the children’s
play, there were still some occasions where I was excluded, such as the following.

Donovan had asked me to sit by him. I was walking near. Alan must have asked
him to sit by him. Donovan said, "Sorry, but Alan and I are sitting together." He
then said, "But you can use a Rescue Hero on the playground because you know a
lot about Rescue Heroes." Alan said, "No girls. We don't need any girls."
Donovan responded back to me, "Sorry, no girls," and then he laughed.
[Field Note Entry: April 4, 2005]

Initially, I felt that I was being rejected and positioned as a “teacher” to a certain
extent. However, this example is actually quite similar to how the children treat each
other sometimes, therefore, this rejected positioning could be considered as an acceptance
in the “student role” from the children’s point of view. They would not say the above to any of the teachers.

From late April 2005 until the completion of data collection in November 2005. I became very involved in the play, particularly in play involving superheroes. When I arrived, a frequent comment to me is, “Want to play Justice League?” Additionally, I was typically assigned a character. Initially, I was assigned the role of “Batgirl.” However, I am often given the role as “Wonder Woman” or “Hawkgirl,” the two lead female characters in Justice League. I was never given the role of a male character. Another change that occurred at this time was my status as a peer. Often before, I would be used as a bad guy. The children would pretend to poison me, trap me, or kill me. At this time, if someone positioned me as a bad guy, another peer, typically Donovan or Alan, will say, “No, she’s not a bad guy,” although, I was still often trapped or poisoned by imaginary bad guys and the rest of my team had to rescue me.

As a researcher, I planned for and anticipated it would take time for me to get involved in the peer culture group, particularly since the particular group I was most interested in consisted of primarily boys. Despite this, I was surprised at how long it did take to become an established member of the classroom and the peer culture group (Corsaro, 1985).

**Challenges in Research with Children**

Ethical issues are ongoing throughout the research process (Alderson, 2004). Researchers should not and cannot see ethics as a hurdle to jump over just to get through the approval of a research project. In many paradigmatic perspectives, ethics reside in
issues of informed consent, deception, privacy, confidentiality, and accuracy (Christians, 2000). However, criticisms of these concepts have arisen pointing out that these concepts do not adequately address all of the aspects of working closely with people in interpretive work, and further they are inherently tied to positivist epistemological views of research. Denzin (1997, as cited in Christians, 2000) has conceived of a “feminist communitarian model” of ethics, which are based primarily on morality over technical ethics. Thus, this model does not ignore issues such as informed consent, rather it places moral issues at the forefront and argues that emphasizing technical ethical issues based on professional standards overshadows or possibly ignores ethical issues that are grounded in moral issues. Central to this model is the ethical stance that participants have a voice in the types of research that is conducted with them, and even further, they can conduct the research on themselves too. In addition, participants and the researcher need to exist within a reciprocal relationship based on care in search of understanding together.

According to Graue and Walsh (1998), “to act ethically is to act the way one acts towards people whom one respects” (p. 55). When researching children, this is a particularly important stance to keep in mind since in our society we often do not treat children with respect. Conceptions of children as “blank slates” or adults in waiting prevent people from conceptualizing children as people who are intelligent, competent, capable of making decisions, and as people who deserve respect (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Ethical issues with research on children go beyond ethical issues of research with adults primarily because adults hold a position of power over children in this society (Christensen, 2004; Mauthner, 1997).
As an adult researcher participating as a different type of adult, leads to some ethical issues that need to be addressed. As an adult I have more power simply due to the status of my role in our society (Christensen, 2004; Mauthner, 1997). In trying to become more of an equal-status member in children’s peer culture worlds, I faced initial rejection in this role due to the children seeing me as an adult with power trying to intrude on their worlds. Christensen (2004) felt that her stance as a researcher helps to mediate issues of power differentials between adults and children. She argued that in any research project, power shifts among different participants and at times the children, as participants, will hold greater power than myself as a researcher. For example, until I established rapport with the children, they did not have to allow me access into their worlds. Thus, relationships and rapport were the initial and most essential steps in my research project.

Hatch (1998) developed a list of questions that he believes all researchers should ask each other before conducting any study ranging from, “Why am I doing this study?” to “Who benefits from the study?” to “Should I intervene on behalf of those at risk?” (p. 68). These are only a few of the questions, however they all point to the ethical questions researchers need to carefully consider in any study, and particularly in a study of young children. Other primary ethical issues, particular to children, are the decision of researchers to intervene if a child is in danger or harm while also remaining loyal to the peer culture the researcher is trying to become a participant within (Graue & Walsh, 1998).
Throughout the study I faced several of these challenges. From the beginning, we decided that while I would not intervene and set limits, I would step in if the children were in immediate danger. There were several times I needed to step in and stop children from hurting each other during superhero play. This was a very challenging decision about when and why to step in as much of superhero play is active and involves pretend fighting. I did step in a couple of times when I felt like one child was being hurt and did not want to be part of the physical activity in that way. I stepped in and made comments such as, “Brian, you’re hurting Alan. Alan, you can tell Brian to stop.” In these instances, I felt like I was stepping into more of a teacher role, however, some of the children in the class do monitor themselves and others and make similar comments. Therefore, I felt that this comment was acceptable and helped me to make sure that all the children were safe and able to express themselves.

Data Collection Methods

Within any qualitative/interpretive study, multiple methods are used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Through the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, the researcher is able to support salient points, themes, or concepts by showing their origins in multiple sources of data. “The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (Flick, 1998, p. 231, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). Researchers sometimes use the term triangulation to align with the positivist conception of validity, however it is primarily used to emphasize the use of multiple methods, which
are intricately connected to having a trustworthy study. The multiple methods used in this study include: participant observation, video revisiting, interviews with the children and teachers, and documents and artifact collection, watching television programs and movies, and a personal reflexive journal.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation was the primary method of data collection. Participant observation serves two primary purposes, “(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation” (Spradley, 1980, p. 54). Becoming a participant observer of children’s peer cultures provides, “insight and insider information about children’s perspectives in classroom life” (Fernie et al., 1988, p. 136). I observed and participated in the setting between two to five days a week for between two to eight hours at a time. My observations and participation in the classroom were based upon my schedule and the children’s typical schedule. I typically observed at least one of the free time play periods for each observation (See Schedule in Table 3.1). In this classroom, children arrived at various times from 7:30 until 12, depending on their family’s schedule for the day. Therefore, it was not atypical for me to arrive at different times each day. In order to help build trust with the children, I told them when I would be coming next and if I had a change in my schedule I told the teachers who then informed the children when I would be coming next. I excused myself during the children’s rest period. The teachers and I mutually decided that it would not be necessary or appropriate for me to stay during this time. As possible I used this two-hour time frame to record my observations, take notes in my
journal, and attend practicum student seminar and classroom meetings. I attended the weekly seminars and meetings as often as possible to develop relationships with all of the adults in the classroom, gain greater understanding of the classroom and the teachers’ perspectives, and to share information on what I was learning. Early on I recorded my observations on a small notebook that I kept in my pocket. As I became more accepted and involved in the peer culture group I only took notes outside of the classroom.

I supplemented and expanded upon my observations and field notes with audio and video recordings. I used a digital recorder to obtain verbatim recording of the children’s conversations while engaged in superhero play. I also used this recorder during interviews with teachers and children. These recordings supplemented my written field notes about the children’s play. I listened to the audiorecordings, took notes, and transcribed aspects of the recordings related to salient themes or threads.

At the site, there are video cameras available within the classroom to record various aspects of the classroom environment, however at the time of my study the videocameras were not working well. The director and teachers recommended that I use a separate video camera and that the children are used to having video cameras that are more visible, based upon other research studies that have been done there. Initially, I was unsure about this as I had anticipated using the non-intrusive cameras. I started out using a videocamera early on the study. As described earlier, at the first circle time I introduced myself I told the children the reasons why I was there and that I would occasionally be using a video camera to record their play to learn more about what they do in their classroom. The videorecordings provided both a visual and audio record of the children
engaged in their play and peer culture. The primary purpose of the video data was to capture aspects of the context that may go unnoticed by the observer or the participants.

Video Revisiting

At the initial circle time when I introduced myself and the video camera, I told the children that I will sometimes share the video recordings of the children’s play with the children with them to understand more about their play from their perspectives and reactions on their play scenario. The video revisiting sessions occurred periodically throughout the study. For the video revisiting sessions, I invited select groups of children, 2-5 at a time, to watch the play scenario and reflect upon it. I selected the children based upon their participation in the particular play scenario. I videotaped the sessions to have both a visual and auditory representation of their perspective (Forman, 1999). Initially, I thought that this event would be novel to the children and they may share various perspectives or reasons for their play, however, over time I believed the children would take the sessions seriously if they felt it was a space where they had a voice to share their thoughts, feelings, and perspective (See Appendix D for sample questions during video revisiting).

Initially, I anticipated that as I became a member of their peer culture, we would have developed a trustful relationship and that this type of a session may be a way we share more about their peer culture. As such, I decided that they may not want the teachers to be a part of this session, and I thought that this would be better from my point of view too. However, my primary interest was in their comfort and security and I thought that I would initially ask to see if they would prefer to have a teacher with them.
This, however, was not necessary as the children were comfortable with leaving the classrooms at times to participate in research activities with different researchers. I observed one of these sessions with the children while I was there and realized that having the teachers with them would not be an issue.

**Interviews**

Throughout the study I conducted interviews with both the teachers and the children. The interviews with teachers focused on understanding the daily life of the classroom from their perspective, understanding their perspective on superhero play, and getting their interpretations and thoughts about the observations I’ve conducted of the children’s play in their peer cultures. Interviews with teachers were audio taped and transcribed. I also had ongoing conversations with the teachers throughout the year. I interviewed the teachers in a more formal context 4 times during the year. Each interview ranged from 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour 53 minutes. (See Appendix C for sample interview questions).

Throughout the study, I also had informal and flexible interviews with small groups of children to get similar perspectives and thoughts to get a better understanding of what I have observed. Interviews occurred both in a small area of the classroom, the “quiet room” and in the classroom. Interviews in the “quiet room” consisted of two or more children, while interviews in the classroom involved one child at a time. As I was conducting the study I found that in groups of two or more, one child tended to dominate the conversation, therefore I wanted the opportunity for all children to share their perspective. For the classroom interviews, I sat at the table in the classroom and my
interviews were presented as a classroom choice during that particular day. The children signed up with me or another teacher if they were interested in participating. More formal interviews with the children occurred twice during the year and the times of the interviews ranged from 1 minute 46 seconds to 13 minutes 38 seconds. The purpose of all the interviews was to understand the person’s perspective more in-depth, to understand more about the daily life of the classroom, to have the participants articulate their feelings and thoughts about superhero play that may not be visible through observations, as well as to serve as a member check, which is an important part of trustworthiness in a qualitative study.

Artifacts

Throughout the study I collected artifacts from the classroom. These included children’s drawings, classroom documents such as meeting notes, seminar notes, documentation panels, observations by teachers and practicum students, photographs of children in play, photographs of children’s work, projects, constructions, and photographs taken by the teachers of all of the above items as well. The artifacts are a concrete representation and historical marking of the daily lives of the children and teachers in the classroom.

Viewing children’s movies and television programs

As the children were playing, I became aware that much of their play was related to current movies and television programs. To understand the characters and plots, I watched many of the current movies, such as The Incredibles and The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl, and current television programs, including the Justice League,
several versions of the Power Rangers series, Teen Titans, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

**Personal Journal**

Throughout the study, I kept a personal journal that was primarily used as a reflexive tool (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). It served as an historical record of my reflections on participant observation, ethical issues, data collection methods, and data analysis (Richardson, 2000). Writing in this journal was an important method to process salient themes, interpretations, and findings, particularly around my role as a researcher.

Spradley’s (1980) framework for participant observation guides this study. Initially I focused on descriptive observations including grand tour observations to get a sense of the general classroom context. Mini-tour observations were then conducted focusing on children’s participation in superhero play. The purpose of these observations was to understand who is engaged in the play, where does it occur, what is the play like, and how the peer culture groups are being constructed within the classroom setting. After analysis of the initial data, I engaged in more focused observations specifically of the children engaged in superhero play. After further analysis sessions, selective observations were used to really understand the specific aspects of children’s peer culture worlds that become salient through analysis of the data. Analysis was recursive and was essential to guide the process of focusing in on more focused and selective observations. The full data analysis process is described in the next section.
Data Analysis Process

Data analysis in an interpretive study is ongoing, recursive, and circular with the purpose of examining and reexamining the phenomenon as it is occurring. Findings from data analysis led to more focused observations, questions for interviews, and information to inquire into during play and conversations. I used the qualitative software program HyperResearch to assist with organizing and coding data. Throughout, I conducted member checks with both the children and the teachers for trustworthiness. Through the study I collected copious amounts of data including field notes, journal entries, audiotapes and transcripts of interviews, videotapes, and other artifacts. In order to organize the data, I dated and labeled all field note and journal entries, documents, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs. I also noted participants’ names and relevant contextual information as appropriate. Most material is stored in my computer in organized folders. Audiorecordings are digital and also stored in folders in my computer. All computer materials have a backup copy that is stored in a locked file cabinet. Videotapes and other artifacts are also stored in a locked file cabinet.

Coding the data

I developed initial codes based upon my readings and interpretations of initial data. Corsaro’s (1985) codes for field notes were used to guide the creation and analysis of observations. These codes include field notes (FN), personal notes (PN), methodological notes (MN), and theoretical notes (TN). Codes were developed related to relevant themes. I also used the qualitative research program, HyperRESEARCH to assist
with coding and analysis. However, my own readings and interpretations guided this procedure to alleviate the risk of the program running the coding and analysis process.

**Generating categories and themes**

After analysis of initial codes, I created and combined codes into categories which led to the development of patterns in the data. As these categories and patterns developed, I used Spradley’s (1980) framework for taxonomic analysis through understanding the school culture, peer culture, and individuals through domain analysis of location, function, sequence, means-end, kind-of, rationale, and cause-effect. Here are examples of the taxonomic worksheets of the school culture and peer culture based on my ongoing analysis. This table analyzes the school culture practices using Spradley’s (1980) means-end analysis (X is a way to do Y). This example analyzes the school culture practices (X) that were ways to incorporate children’s interests in superheroes in the school culture (Y).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means-End</th>
<th>X is a way to do Y X is a way to incorporate children’s interest in superheroes in the school culture (Y)</th>
<th>• Incorporating superheroes into songs at circle time • Talking about movies and television shows during lunch/snack • Providing books about superheroes and writing books • Bringing in a newspaper article about Batman • Providing capes and accessories • Co-constructing limits around superhero play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 3.6: School Culture Taxonomic Worksheet – Supporting Children’s Interests
This next table is an analysis of the rationale (X is a reason for doing Y) for analyzing the teachers reasons (X) for limiting superhero play in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>X is a reason for doing Y</th>
<th>X is a reason for limiting superhero play in the classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Some children were primarily playing superheroes all day is a reason for limiting superhero play in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One child primarily engaged in the physical aspects of superhero play is a reason for limiting…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some of the children were using their home toys (superheroes) most of the day is a reason for limiting…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.7: School Culture Taxonomic Worksheet – Reasons for Limits on Superheroes

In the peer culture, there were multiple meanings about superheroes in the peer culture. The following taxonomic worksheets examine the children’s means-end reasons for including and excluding children in superhero play through Spradley’s (1980) X is a way to be included (excluded) in superhero play (Y).
Means-end | X is a way to be included in superhero play | Wearing a cape is a way to be included in superhero play. Asking, “Can I play?” is a way to be included... Choosing a character is a way to be included in superhero play. Creating “new characters is a way to include someone Saying there can be “two” or more of the same character is a way to be included Following the “leader” is a way to be included in superhero play Asking the “leader” – “Who can I be?” is a way to be included in superhero play.

Table 3.8: Ways to be included in superhero play

Means-end | X is a way to do Y X is a way to exclude someone from superhero play | Gender is a way to exclude someone from superhero play A saved sign is a way to exclude someone from superhero play A cape is a way to exclude someone from superhero play Not enough characters is a way to exclude Age is a way to exclude Not having a key is way to exclude Asking “Can I play?” is a way to be excluded Asking the “leader” – “Who can I be?” is a way to be excluded in superhero play.

Table 3.9: Ways to exclude someone from superhero play.

Spradley’s (1980) taxonomic analysis also supported greater understanding of the similar and different meanings of superhero play for individual children. For example, Ron and Alan shared many similarities for reasons for playing superheroes such as being
a leader and connecting with peers, but different reasons and effects such as learning to regulate emotions for Ron and learning English for Alan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means-End</td>
<td>X is a way to do y</td>
<td>Superhero play is way to be a leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to</td>
<td>Superhero play is way to have control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to connect with peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to use toys from home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to show you care about your same sex friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause-Effect</td>
<td>X is a result of Y</td>
<td>Learning how to regulate his emotions is a result of playing superheroes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Becoming part of the peer culture group is a result of playing superheroes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.10: Ron’s Taxonomic Analysis (Excerpt)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means-End</td>
<td>X is a way to do y</td>
<td>Superhero play is way to be a leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to</td>
<td>Superhero play is way to have control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to connect with peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to use toys from home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to show you care about your same sex friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero play is a way to be active.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause-Effect</td>
<td>X is a result of Y</td>
<td>Learning English is (in part) as result of playing superheroes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Becoming part of the peer culture group is a result of playing superheroes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.11: Alan’s Taxonomic Analysis (Excerpt)
In chapter 4, these findings through the data analysis will be described in detail through full description of the school culture, the peer culture interested in superheroes, and the primary children involved in the peer culture group.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness as developed by Lincoln and Guba, is a “set of criteria that have been offered for judging the quality or goodness of qualitative research” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 258). Credibility is a criterion of quality that is used to ensure that the research represents the participants’ experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To ensure credibility I will describe what I did in terms of prolonged engagement at the site, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, progressive subjectivities, and member checks.

_Prolonged engagement_ as a quality of credibility means that the researcher and the participants have engaged with each other over a significant period of time (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Prolonged engagement provides the researcher and participants to build their relationship and trust together. This relationship and significant amount of time in the setting provides a more likely credible account from the researcher. In my study, I was directly in the classroom for 11 months, attending from 2-5 days per week from 3-8 hours per day. When researching children, this prolonged engagement was even more important. As discussed in my researchers’ role, it took a long time for the children to become used to me being a participant within their peer culture group, given my
differential status as an adult. Therefore, spending more time in the setting, particularly at
the beginning of the study, was essential to build these relationships and trust.

Persistent observation, as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1989) is used to “add
depth to the scope which prolonged engagement affords” (p. 237). Participant
observation was one of the primary methodological tools in my research of children’s
peer culture. Persistent observation also involves focusing later observations based on
existing data. While initially I engaged in a wide scope observation (Spradley, 1980),
through ongoing data analysis I focused my observations on particular groups of children
and play situations.

Peer debriefing involves having an uninvested person, or persons preferably, go
over my analyses with me through engaged discussions and thoughtful questioning (Guba
& Lincoln, 1989). The purpose of peer debriefing is to help me as a researcher be sure
that I am seeing what I’m seeing and not just making suppositions that I believe should
be in my analysis. Having more peers to debrief with also provides for a wider range of
perspectives, which can also be useful in analyzing given data, developing questions, and
provoking different thoughts and ideas. Further, peer debriefing is also useful for
reducing stress from the intense experience of engagement in a rich interpretive research
project. Throughout the study and afterwards during more intense data analysis and
writing, I processed this information with a group of two peers, my primary advisor, and
other committee members.
Negative case analysis is another essential feature of credibility in interpretive research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Negative case analysis includes analyzing and accounting for all cases, those that fit the emerging themes and patterns, and those that do not. Cases that do not fit within my themes and patterns are very important to pay attention to and include with the data analysis process. Through examining the individual cases of four members of the peer culture, I explore the similarities and differences related to the meanings and perspectives of the children involved in the superhero peer culture group. These differences across children illustrate some of the negative cases that do not align to all members of the peer culture group.

Progressive subjectivities is defined as “the process of monitoring the evaluator’s (or any inquirer’s) own developing construction” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 238). As a researcher aligned with the constructivist paradigm, this is an issue of credibility I need to keep at the forefront. Because I believe the research should be conducted and constructed together with the participants, I needed to be sure that I am not holding up my own interpretation over others. Initially I created a written document at Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe, detailing what I think I am going to find in the study. Throughout the study I kept a record of my assumptions in my research journal and compared to my original assumptions periodically. The purpose was to ensure that I did not put too much privilege on my own interpretations, both original and ongoing, over the interpretations and constructions of the participants. I also used peer debriefing sessions to have others check on my assumptions and privilege.
Member checks “is the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 239). Member checks occurred on an ongoing basis throughout the study. A member check involves the researcher “checking” her construction with the participants to ensure it represents what occurred from their point of view. These occurred both formally and informally. Informal member checks occurred with the teachers periodically after observations and after interviews to verify that what they included in their notes is what they meant. A formal member check occurred after I constructed a written representation and shared it with the teachers prior to a conference we presented at in December 2005 and after the write up of my findings in 2007. Within my study, member checks with preschool children were more challenging because they usually cannot read. I primarily conducted ongoing member checks through questioning what they were saying or doing during play, talking to them about issues at lunch and snack, and through video revisiting sessions. The video revisiting sessions were a primary means of member checking with small groups of children.

Transferability: Transferability is the parallel criteria to generalizability or external validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). As an interpretive researcher, I do not subscribe to the belief that my study would somehow be generalizable to another context or setting due to my belief in reality being created in particular social and cultural contexts. Transferability is dependent on the “receiver” (p. 241) meaning the reader of the study needs to determine how they see the study as being applicable to their own context or reality. Thick description (Geertz, 1973) is a primary way to ensure transferability. Transferability through thick description should “provide an extensive and
careful description of the time, the place, the context, the culture” along with “a complete
date base as humanly possible to facilitate transferability judgments on the part of
others who may wish to apply the study to their own situations (or situations in which
they have an interest) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 242). In chapter 4 I describe the findings
of the study and follow in chapter 5 with a discussion of possible implications to
classroom settings. Here readers can determine how the findings and interpretations may
be transferability to their own context.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

How is superhero play situated in an early childhood setting? In order to learn about superhero play in an early childhood classroom, my research was situated in a setting where superhero play was embedded into the daily life of the classroom. The following are sub-questions that address the broader question. The sub-questions relate to understanding superhero play as situated in the peer culture and school culture, the teachers’ and children’s perspectives on superhero play, and how applying multiple theoretical perspectives provides further understanding of superhero play.

- How is superhero play an aspect of the school culture?
- What are the teachers’ perspectives of superhero play?
- How is superhero play an aspect of children’s peer culture life?
- What are the children’s perspectives of superhero play
- What is the relationship of superhero play as an aspect of peer culture to the school culture context?
- How do the teachers and children’s perspectives intersect?
- How do multiple theoretical perspectives interpret and inform our understanding of the phenomenon of superhero play?

This chapter discusses my findings in relationship to these research questions. The first section examines how superhero play is an aspect of the school culture and what are the teachers’ perspectives of superhero play. The second section analyzes the peer culture group interested in superheroes and the perspectives of the children on superhero play.
The third section examines the intersections between the peer culture and school culture and the teachers and children’s perspectives about superhero play. The final section examines how applying different theoretical perspectives can enhance our understanding of superhero play.

**Superhero Play in the School Culture**

How is superhero play an aspect of the school culture? Superhero play will be different and have different interpretations based upon the cultural norms of the people participating in the given context. Thus, it is essential to describe the school culture context in order to understand the norms, practices, and meanings of superhero play in the given context. School culture is defined as “a common set of activities or routines, values, concerns and attitudes constructed and communicated about and in a particular school setting by the classroom participants” (Fernie et al, 1988, p. 137). Here I describe important aspects of the school culture, based on my analysis of observations, interviews, conversations, and participation in the setting that directly relate to school culture and superhero play or aspects of the school culture that are associated with superhero play. Some aspects of the school culture described indirectly relate to superhero play, therefore it is important to describe these aspects to get a more holistic understanding of the cultural context to understand how the peer culture group’s practices are situated in the larger school culture context. These aspects include: (1) Activities and Routines, (2) Values, and (3) Language. First, the school culture’s activities and routines will be described since they illustrate the values and language of the school culture context.
Activities and Routines

Every culture has routines and activities that become part of the norms and practices of the group. One of the most common routines in a school is the schedule of daily activities. In this section on school culture, I describe how the school culture practices occur in the daily life of the classroom through the activities and routines, particularly in relation to superheroes and superhero play. The schedule of the school in chapter 3 described the approximate times and the activities associated with the different time periods. Below is this same schedule with an additional column illustrating the use of superheroes and superhero play within the curriculum based on the school culture context.

Daily Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (all times are approximate and vary depending on the day/activity/children)</th>
<th>Schedule/Activities</th>
<th>Superhero Play/Superheroes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:30-10:00</td>
<td>Arrival - Children arrive at various times. They put their items from home in their cubbies. Free Play. (Snack Available)</td>
<td>Children can choose play superheroes and use home toys during this time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-10:30</td>
<td>Circle Time</td>
<td>Superheroes are brought up by the children during open songs, discussions, and sharing time (sharing items from home).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-11:30</td>
<td>Free Play (Snack Available)</td>
<td>Superhero play is limited* Children are discouraged from engaging in the active form of superhero play based on co-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
constructed limits between the teachers and children. Children do talk about superheroes, make Legos into superheroes, and sometimes use superhero action figures at the tables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:30-11:40</td>
<td>Clean Up/Selecting a Seat for Lunch</td>
<td>Children sometimes have superhero lunchboxes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:00</td>
<td>Outside Play/Courtyard/Indoor Game</td>
<td>Superhero play is allowed at this time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00-1:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Children often discuss superheroes at this time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-1:30</td>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>Sometimes children bring in books about superheroes to have the teachers read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30-3:00</td>
<td>Rest</td>
<td>Children may bring superhero action figures or related items with them on their cots. Children share or trade their figures with the other children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00-4:00</td>
<td>Freeplay (Snack Available)</td>
<td>-See above under Arrival/Free Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00-4:30</td>
<td>Circle Time</td>
<td>-See above under circle time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30-5:00</td>
<td>Freeplay</td>
<td>-See above under free choice activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00-5:30</td>
<td>Outside Play/Courtyard/Indoor Activity</td>
<td>-See above under outdoor play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30-6:00</td>
<td>Tabletop Activities/Last parent arrivals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NoteParents arrive at various times from 3:00-6:00 to pick up their children

Table 4.1: School Culture Daily Schedule with Superhero Play
This chart was constructed based on my interpretations of the classroom schedule based on participation in the classroom, discussions with teachers about the daily schedule, particularly as it relates to superheroes, and my observations of children’s interactions and use of superhero artifacts and superhero play while participating in the school culture. In this section I will describe each time period of the school culture schedule with specific aspects the school culture and its relationship to superheroes/superhero play.

Arrival and Free Play

In any school culture, there are different arrival practices. This is an important time for young children as it is a time to transition from home to school. In the school culture there are several relevant practices specific to this school culture: Arrival, Home Toys, Superhero Play, and Snack.

Arrival. Children arrive at various times within a 2 and 3 hour time frame (from 7:30-10:00) based on their parents’ work schedules. They are brought to school by an adult, typically the parent(s) or another caregiver, and the children can begin free play immediately upon arrival. Sometimes the individual children even vary day-by-day in their specific arrival time, particularly if his/her parent’s work schedule varies, which was common particularly among the children whose parents were faculty members, as their schedule often varied based on when they were teaching. The children can arrive through either the front door or the back door, however most come in through the front door. The children walk down the steps with their parent(s) and walk across the room to where the cubbies are located. They put what they have brought from home, including their lunch,
in their cubby and they take off their coat/jacket if they are wearing one. After they are settled in, they say goodbye to their parent(s) and proceed to find something to play.

Since children are already involved in play, other children who are just arriving are either invited into or need to negotiate entry into an already established play scenario. These various arrivals change the dynamics of the play situations that have already begun or are already in the process of negotiation. Sometimes this negotiation involves the use of home toys.

*Home toys.* In the school culture, the teachers allow the children to bring toys from home that they can use in the school context. During the first free play time, based on the co-constructed limits, the children are able to use these toys. The children often arrive carrying a new item and the other children often greet the other child to see what they have. The peer culture group members interested in superheroes often bring in toys or items from home that reflect this interest.

*Snack.* In this school culture, snack is an open snack, in which the snack is put out onto the table and the children are able to come and eat snack when and if they are hungry. They are also able to choose to eat something from their lunchbox. The open snack is available during the first two morning free play periods until about 11 AM, and during the afternoon free play. The teachers usually put it away at 11 AM, because it is getting close to lunch time. The children are also able to select and eat one item from their lunch box if they would prefer to eat that instead of what is available for snack on that given day. The morning snack might consist of some cereal, fruit, and milk and the afternoon snack might be cheese, crackers, and juice. The open snack also provides the
opportunity for small groups of children to join together and provides opportunities for discussions among children, which for some of the children centered on superheroes.

**Circle Time**

Circle time is the primary time the whole group of children and teachers meet together. At circle, the teachers and children discuss what the children have been playing, what curricular opportunities are available in the classroom, and sometimes an opportunity for the children to share items they have brought from home. To start circle, one of the children assigned the job as the “bell ringer” gives a warning such as, “Two minutes ‘til circle. The teachers then start circle by singing, “Come on everybody and find a seat, find a seat, come on everybody and find a seat. It’s circle time.” The children then gather on the carpet in the middle of the room that has a large circle on the carpet. The children are able to sit on the circle or on a teachers’ lap. Sometimes the children will ask a teacher before circle if they can sit on her lap. The children are allowed to bring an item to circle, but they have to put the item behind their back so that it doesn’t keep them from listening to the teacher or other children. One teacher leads the circle and who leads the circle changes depending on the day. The teacher will usually sing a couple songs or fingerplays and then talk about the different opportunities available in the classroom. These are usually referred to as “working ideas.” A “working idea” refers to when the children are engaged in one of the curricular opportunities the teachers have provided in the group or an individual project the child has initiated. If children were already participating in some of these ideas the teachers will often ask the children to share. Occasionally, the children will have a “sharing idea.” The teachers sometimes initiate
this, but frequently the children initiate the idea of bringing something to the circle to share with others. When the children share an idea, each child who wants to share takes a turn to walk around the circle and show the other children what they brought. The children have the option of having the item being a “looking idea” or a “touching idea.” A “looking idea” means that the other children can only look at the item, but not touch it. A “touching idea” means that the children can also touch and maybe hold the item. After this, the teacher will then ask the children what are other ideas they are working on. A child who wants to share will then usually state who they are playing with and what they are playing, or what they are going to do after circle based on the available choices.

For example,

At circle, Donovan said, "Me, and Jeannie, Alan and Brian, we're playing cars so if anyone wants to join us they can." [Field notes, April 22, 2005]

After the children who wish to share have an opportunity to engage in this activity, the teachers will dismiss the children. Sometimes the teachers connect the dismissal to something they are wearing. For example, “If you’re wearing a blue shirt you may make a playing choice.” The children will then go to make a choice for the second free play period.

Second Free Play

During the second free play period, the children are still free to choose to play in any area of the classroom, but they are encouraged to engage in the curricular opportunities (“working ideas”) and there are limits placed on the active superhero play,
such as running, jumping, kicking, and with the use of home toys, particularly superhero toys and toys such as Barbies and Bratz.

Transitions

Transitions are an important aspect of the daily routines in early childhood classrooms (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In this classroom, there are four different transitions to the second free play period: clean up, finding a seat for lunch, lining up to go outside, and getting to the outside playground. The school culture has developed procedures to help address these transitions. These school culture routines reflect the school cultures values of choice, responsibility, children’s relationships and the use of language in the school culture. This language is more visible during this time due to an increased emphasis on the teachers’ roles and direction to assist with the various transitions.

Clean-up. Clean-up time is an important aspect of the school culture due to the school culture’s value on children’s responsibilities, the language used, and the use of “saved signs.” After the second free play session the children and teachers clean up the room together. At the end of free play, the “bell ringer” (one of the selected jobs for the school) plays the xylophone and gives a warning that it is almost time to clean up. If it is warm enough outside, based on the temperature guidelines from the state of Ohio, and not raining, this person also announces that it is time to put on any clothes they have removed and to put on their shoes. A typical example would be, “Two minutes to clean-up. Clothes Alert.” After the warning, the bell ringer will then ring the bell again and announce, “Clean-up Time!” The children are then expected to help out and clean all
areas. The children work as a group to clean the entire play area. All of the children are expected to work together and clean up all areas, not just the areas they were playing in. The teachers pick up and provide suggestions to the children of what needs to be cleaned up. All items are expected to be put away, except items that have been “saved.” Typically “saved” items are structures made from blocks. Sometimes these are small or larger structures. The structures can be saved according to the children’s desires throughout the week until Friday, the day the custodian vacuums the entire floor area. After cleaning, the children take their lunch box out of their cubby and select where they are going to sit.

*Selecting a seat for lunch.* After cleaning up after the morning play time the children bring their lunchbox/bag over to the area with the tables. The children are able to select where they want to sit. Many of the children try to sit with their close peers during this time. Sometimes they rush over to the table. After the area is clean, the children then go to their cubbies and get their lunch box and bring it to the lunch area. They are allowed to select where they want to sit based on where the teachers have put chairs. There are three tables that seat anywhere from 6-8 children at a time. The teachers either sit in the empty spots or bring a chair up to a corner. Once the seat has a lunchbox in it, the seat is considered taken and the children have to find an empty chair. The teachers and other children often assist in this endeavor.

Here is an example of where the children and I sat on a given day. In terms of choosing a seat for lunch, I would bring another chair up to the table where there was an empty space. Typically, I would sit next to the first child who asked me to sit by them or
I would sit at a table that had many children that tended to be interested in superheroes on the assumption that the topic might come up during lunch.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lunch Table</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Eric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Donovan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Jeannie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Field Notes: May 18, 2005]

Figure 4.1: Example of Sitting at Lunch

After the children put their lunchbox on a chair, they line up at the back steps to go outside or to the outside courtyard if it is too cold or wet from the rain. The outside courtyard is located just outside the classroom and is a covered area in-between the two sides of the building. It has a blacktop area and is connected to another outside area that is uncovered and has a picnic table. If it is too cold, the children will stay inside and will be at the circle area to play a game, such as Duck, Duck, Goose.

_Lining up and plugging in._ In order to get to the outdoor playground, the teachers have the children line up and one teacher stands at the front of the line and one stands at the back. The area between the classroom and the playground has a sidewalk that is next to a road that has frequent traffic due to a parking garage and a parking lot being next to the playground. For the children’s safety, the teachers want the children to be close to the building and away from the street. Therefore, they have the children “plug-in,” which involves the children putting one of their hands on the wall of the building and either touching or staying very close to the wall until they reach the playground area. Once they
reach the playground area, one of the teachers unlocks the gate and then the children enter the playground and choose where and what they want to do.

Outside Play/Courtyard/Indoor Games

Outside play is an important feature of the school culture because it is a time for free choice, it is a different context than the rest of the school day, the playground has been different places and sites, and the children can run and engage in more active play, such as riding bicycles. Playing outdoors is also beneficial for children’s overall health and development particularly gross motor development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Reflecting the school culture’s values for choice and relationships, the outside play is a time when children engage in free play and interact with their peers. They may also bring their toys from home outside. The children are responsible to keep track of the item and bring it back inside. Similar to the first inside free play period, the children are expected to make plans with any home toys they bring outside. The outside playground has many open areas as well as two climbers, one gazebo, one partially enclosed wooden climber, a storage shed that has tricycles and other equipment, a sandpit, a paved path going around the whole playground, and a small hill near one of the climbers. The children use these different places to meet, hide, run, and climb. At the end of the outdoor time, one of the teachers gives a verbal warning, such as, “Few minutes to line up.” When it is time a teacher will shout out, “Time to line up.” The children will then line up along the wall of the building with the line leader in the front of the line. The children will “plug-in” to the wall and return to the classroom in the same routine as they came out. When they enter
the classroom they remove their coat, if they are wearing one, go to a sink and wash their hands and then sit at their seat they previously selected at a lunch table.

**Lunch**

In this context, lunch is valued as both a time to eat, as well as a time to engage in conversations with the people at your table. The teachers, who sit and eat lunch with the children, will often ask the children different information and questions about their families and about popular culture information, such as any movies they have seen recently.

**Stories/Birthdays**

After lunch the children will listen to stories or if a child is having a birthday, the school will have a birthday celebration instead of the stories.

**Stories.** Having a more structured time for stories reflects the school's value in the children’s overall development and how listening to stories is a tool to promote children’s development, especially cognitive. It also reflects the school culture’s values of democratic principles of choice and relationships. The teachers usually select the stories, often grouped by a theme, such as animal books. After lunch the children are able to choose to go to one of two story groups. A teacher or graduate student leads the story reading. One of the teachers announces the stories at the end of lunch. She plays the xylophone and then shows each of the sets of books (usually there are two), sometimes grouped by a theme, such as animal books. As she does this, she announces where the group of stories will be read. One group is read in the quiet room and the other group occurs on the stairs in the middle section of the room. The children then clean up their
lunch materials, put their lunch box in their cubby, and choose which story group they are interested in. The teachers randomly decide on a limit, usually about half of the class, based on how many children come to a given area. Then, they tell other children (if interested), “This group is full. You’ll have to go to the ____ (stairs or quiet room, depending on which was full). The children typically try to go to the area where their favorite peers are and sometimes they decide this together at the lunch table as they’re cleaning up. Sometimes the children bring in stories and ask the teachers if they will read these stories during the story groups. The teachers honor these requests when they are made. On a few occasions some children brought in stories about superheroes, including a comic book that they wanted to be read during story group. On this occasion, the teacher allowed the child, Donovan, to read his book to the story group.

**Birthdays.** The birthday celebration reflects the school culture values in children’s development and social relationships. They understand that birthdays are important to individual children and that children also enjoy celebrating these occasions with their peers and families. If there is a child who is having a birthday, the birthday is typically celebrated during lunch and then the children are able to open cards the other children make for them after lunch. Sometimes one or both of the children’s parents will come to the school to participate in the birthday celebration. Sometimes they might bring pizza or another treat. The teachers and children make a cake together during the second morning play period (unless the parents were bringing in a cake). During this time, the teachers also put out folded paper and markers for the children to make cards. The teachers have a box the cards are deposited into when they are finished. On top of the box, the teachers
also put a sign that says “Happy Birthday” and a sign with the name of the child who is having the birthday underneath. This provides an opportunity for the children to write these words on the card if they want to.

If there is a birthday, after lunch a teacher will ring the xylophone and invite the children to come to the circle area. The child who is having the birthday sits in the middle and the other children sit in a circle surrounding the child. The child is then able to open the cards. He/she opens them one by one. A teacher usually reads anything that is written on the card and announces who the card is from if the child who wrote it doesn’t announce it him/herself. After stories or the birthday celebration, the children go to the bathroom and then go to their cot for rest.

Rest

A time for rest is important for children’s physical health and this school culture also values it as a time for children’s interests and social relationships. The children use their own pillows and blankets from home during rest. During rest the children are also able to have any items from home that might make them feel comfortable, such as a stuffed animal or action figure. The children may share any items they have with other children too.

Afternoon: Repeat of the Morning Schedule

After rest, the school follows a similar schedule as the morning with an open free play period, a circle time, a second free play period (with limits on superhero play and home toys), outside play (or courtyard or indoor games), followed by going home with
families. In the afternoon if it is colder, the children come back inside and are able to play with a limited amount of toys at the tables.

This section examined the activities and routines of the school culture. Through examining these practices, we can understand many aspects of the school culture and the daily activities. These activities are important to understand and situate the peer culture and their interest in superheroes. It is also essential to understand how superheroes became integrated into different aspects of the school culture in a later section. The activities and routines in the school culture are conducted in a certain way based on the values of the school culture. The following section describes the values of the school culture in detail.

**Values**

The school culture’s values are situated in the social, cultural, political, and historical context of the school and the individuals participating within the context (Vygotsky, 1978). The primary values of the school culture are reflected in their democratic practices, relationships with children, families, and practicum students, and professional values, including its goals of teacher preparation and extending their research of promoting development in young children and pedagogical practices regarding.

**Democratic Practices**

The teachers’ democratic practices influenced by Dewey are reflected in several aspects of the school culture that include: Choices, Making Plans, Saved Signs, and Co-Construction of Classroom Limits.
Choices. The teachers believe that it is important for children to have choices. Children are provided with choices throughout the day, with the primary opportunities for choice provided during free play. The children are allowed to choose who and what they want to play throughout the day. The children are also allowed to use toys from home within their play. The teachers also provide the children with opportunities to vote and the majority of votes determine what will happen. During the time I was there, there were many instances of the children voting, such as the children voting on what indoor game to play when it was raining (Duck, Duck, Goose vs. Simon Says). The children were also provided with the opportunity to sign-up on a list when there was a popular activity for limited space or items for children to use. I also used this practice to have the children sign up to do interviews with me as there were so many children interested, but I could only do an interview with one or two children at a time.

Making plans. In this school culture, the teachers believe that it is important to value children’s interests, including their interest in their personal items from home. When children bring items from home they are often novel items or items that reflect popular culture, and often, many of the children are interested in using the same item at the same time. This also occurs at other times with items in the classroom too. Therefore, the teachers established a practice of “making plans.” When a child is interested in a toy or item that another child is using, the child is encouraged to “make a plan” with the other child. The plan usually involves a negotiation back and forth between the two children of a reasonable time frame in which the child who is using the toy or item will finish with it and then the child who wants to the toy or item will be able to use it. The children are
encouraged to negotiate this on their own, but the teachers provide support as needed. The children who are new to the classroom usually need more support to learn and understand the practice. The teachers usually help by giving the children words to say such as, “How about she uses the toy for two minutes?” and then the child might say to the other child, “Two minutes,” and then the other child will either agree and take the toy or respond, “Three,” or something similar.

_Saved signs._ The children sometimes create elaborate structures or other items that they want to keep working on or use at a later time. The teachers value this interest of the children and therefore created a practice of having the children create a “saved sign” on items they want to keep. In order to save the structure, the child or children need to put a “saved sign” on the structure. The “saved sign” is a piece of paper that the child(ren) writes his/her name, a small photograph of the child (which are made available to the children in the school), or a combination of both that is then taped onto the structure. If there is a saved sign on the structure it can be saved until the child(ren) take it down.

_Co-construction of classroom limits._ As part of a democracy, all members are considered part of the community and have an opportunity to voice their opinions and beliefs. The teachers believe having a voice is an essential aspect of their classroom and integrate this in the development of the classroom limits. In the classroom, there was a list titled, “Real important ideas to help our school feel FUN, HAPPY, and SAFE.” The following is the list of the phrases on this sign that I wrote down from the sign:
- Walk inside, except for around circle
- Don’t go on the deck. You need to have a teacher with you before you step on any stairs.
- Don’t go out of our school without a grown-up, and don’t hide from them like in the dramatic play closet.
- Leave the stuff on the walls the way they are.
- Use toys carefully.
- Don’t fight. Be careful of other children and teachers, too.
- Just touch stuff in your own cubby, and don’t move them.
- Words should sound great – not hard, and don’t scream. And then you can say whatever you want.
- Take good care of people – children and teachers – in our school.

Initially I assumed that this list was created this year. I asked Kathy about the list in an email to find out more about who participated in the creation of the list.

The classroom "rules" list that you're asking about was created several years ago. The children who were involved are in about 3rd - 4th grade now. About once a year we revisit these to see if the current children want to come up with a new list, edit that list, or whatever. So far each year's group has been well satisfied with that list as is! We'll keep trying to have each year's group re-visit and hopefully revise it -- or maybe even come up with something totally different!

[Kathy Email correspondence, March 8, 2005].

Thus, from the beginning, the children are seen as collaborators in the development and practice of following the limits of the classroom. Taking part in the development of classroom limits provides the children with ownership and responsibility for these practices. During the year, there were several children who would rush to the door when it was time to line up and push to be the first person in line. The teachers brought this issue to the children at a circle time period and asked the children what they should do as a class to address the issue. Together the children and teachers developed a list of classroom practices to line up safely. This list was then posted by the staircase where the children line up to go outside.
During the year of this study, the teachers were also concerned about the children’s strong interest in superheroes and superhero play. A limit was established in which the children could play superheroes before the first circle time, both in the morning and afternoon, but in the free play period afterward they should make other choices within the classroom. Prior to this year, there were not limits on when the children could play superheroes in the classroom. Kathy describes how she and Andrea tried to work with the children and their interests in superheroes. In an interview I asked about how the limits on superhero play was established, as it was in place before I arrived:

It has to do with the children we have right now. Not always a limit. Because some children who…I don’t want to use the word obsessive, but they were missing out on things that they were capable of, should have been trying. We needed to figure out and we did it with them …together with them…how can we make it so your idea can still happen and we can make it so you are trying other ideas at school? We kind of bumped back the circle time to give more time for superhero play. [Kathy Interview, March 4, 2005]

The teachers believe it is important for children to become engaged in a variety of opportunities to help foster their overall development. Kathy describes her concern that because the children were primarily playing superheroes throughout the day that she felt they were missing out on other opportunities that would contribute to their development, such as the curricular opportunities the teachers provide based on observations of the children’s interests. Through the creation of this limit, they also recognized that this issue was not exclusive to the children who were interested in superheroes, but also to other children particularly in their use of the toys they brought from home.
The other thing we recognized was …there’s a strong group of children right now, girls and boys, that bring a particular item to school, as their transition, as their link into the community, and that that’s an important process for them. So we had to make our day accommodating for some of the activities around those items to take place. We also need to make sure that other kinds of things also happen so rather than having a circle time that’s right away, which sort of makes sense in some ways, we bumped it make so it’s sort of in the middle so that those transitional items from home and those important shared topics from home can be explored to some extent and after circle we have almost an equal amount of time to try some other things. [Kathy Interview, March 4, 2005]

Kathy believes that for several of the children, bringing a toy from home serves as an important transitional object from home to school. She believes that the home toys are also an important way for the children to connect with one another and become connected into the community, specifically the peer culture group. However, she has concerns that many of these children are missing out on other curricular ideas provided in the school culture context when they use their home toys for extensive periods of time during the school day. Thus, she believes the limit on superhero play and the use of home toys after circle provides an opportunity for the children to engage in other curricular possibilities, while still providing the children with an opportunity to use these toys as a transitional object and for a significant period of time during the first morning free play period prior to circle. Through her description of “an almost equal amount of time”, she describes how she believes both the children’s interests and developmental needs are equally important as the school culture’s curriculum opportunities.
Andrea describes the limit as providing the children with relief as well as the room for flexibility within the limit.

Andrea: Sometimes I think it’s for lack of a better word a relief. They’ll come to circle time and say, “And now we’re not playing this anymore because it’s circle time.”

Kathy: It’s true

Andrea: …… self-control, if you’re jumping and you’re running, you’re shooting, you’re screaming; it’s really really hard to stop. So having this kind of way where like now this will be done and now other things can happen, and again, they’re probably if they still need to figure out things of power, we’re not like well that’s a robot and that’s kind of like a Power Ranger and you’re going to have to put it away. Sometimes some of the kids ask us and it’s like, “Oh, it’s alright.” I’m not interested in saying this robot can be out and this robot cannot be out. And we even started and it wasn’t so much power play as Olivia’s Bratz from home. It became that’s all that they were doing, they spread out that blanket and they’d negotiate the accessories, but it was ours, so it became so after circle, ok, you can put the Bratz dolls away. So I think that it kind of gives them a break from that and they can still find ways, I mean after circle time, they went over with the linked, what do you call those things,

Kathy: legos

Andrea: the flexi blocks and they made snakes out of them and going through the school with them. So it’s still kind of a power, you know Donovan’s still wearing his Superman thing and still going through in a powerful way, but it’s not shooting, running, screaming at each other [Interview, March 4, 2005]

In this transcript, the teachers describe the limits as opportunities for children to help develop self-control, which is an important aspect of children’s overall development.

Andrea states, “…self-control…so having this kind of way where like now this will be done and now other things can happen…” Here she describes how the children monitor themselves and how this limit provides them a way to stop play that can be challenging to stop due to its high activity level.
The teachers described the type of limits that were co-constructed with the children in their presentation at NAEYC in December 2005.

“You can’t really bump into each other or hit. You can only hit the air.”
“You can play superheroes in the block area so you’re not running into other people’s ideas.”
“After circle time, you can make a different choice so you can have a chance to play everywhere in the room.” [Andrea and Kathy - Paper presentation at the NAEYC Conference, December 2005].

Examples of co-construction of limits include creating the classroom rules, developing a plan on how to line up, and creating limits on superhero play and the use of home toys. This co-construction of limits reflects the teacher’s value of the children’s interests, concerns for their overall development, and their value in democratic practices. Through bringing the issue to the children they were able to create the limits together and provide the children the opportunity to have choice, power, and ownership with the limits established in the classroom.

The teachers value democratic practices as evident through several classroom practices including providing children with choices, the practice of making plans, the use of saved signs, and the co-construction of classroom limits. These practices reflect their theoretical and philosophical beliefs, particularly in valuing the whole child and their beliefs in the Reggio Emilia Approach. These practices and philosophical beliefs are the core of their pedagogical practice. As a teacher preparation program, they teach this philosophy and practice to future early childhood educators, which is another essential component of their school culture, as well as an important value that underlies their teaching practices.
**Relationships**

The preschool classroom is multiage, with children ranging in age from three to five. This multiage configuration reflects beliefs in the importance of learning from each other aligned with Vygotsky’s belief in learning from more competent peers (1978) and the importance of relationships between children and between the teachers and children, which is also reflective of the practices and beliefs of the schools of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 1998). Many of the children attend the school from when they are an infant through the time they start kindergarten. Siblings of the children currently attending are provided with a priority status for entry into the classroom. Thus, many families develop relationships with the teachers and the program over a significant period of time with multiple children attending the school.

As the children participate in the classroom for up to three years and children enter and exit the program fairly fluidly, there is not a set beginning of the school year or end of the school year. Therefore, the culture of school has been developed and changes over time. There is never one set group of children that participates for a full year together as is often seen in other contexts, particularly elementary schools. Therefore, the norms and practices may develop and change over time. This is particularly important when looking at peer culture groups and how they develop over time, given the change in children at various time periods.
**Professional Values**

The teachers are part of the professional community of early childhood education. They are involved in professional early childhood organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), and are actively involved in the study of the Reggio Emilia Approach and have visited the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy on several occasions. Their curriculum development is influenced by all of these aspects and reflects their professional and personal values. Essential professional values the teachers expressed include the incorporation of the aspects of Reggio Emilia Approach, the teachers’ roles in classroom, being a teacher preparation and research site, and maintaining appropriate practices through integrating standards.

The curriculum is based on the concept of the whole child. The teachers view children’s development holistically and believe that children’s development needs to be viewed as integrated. The teachers believe play is a primary way in which children learn. The teachers provide extensive amounts of time for children to play throughout the day. The teachers have described the importance of having a significant amount of time for play in order to provide a context for play to develop and for the opportunity for the play to become deeper and richer.

*Reggio Emilia Approach.* The teachers value the practices of the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. They have visited the schools on several occasions, read current literature on the approach, and participate as members in a Reggio Study group in Ohio. The Reggio Emilia Approach influences many aspects of their values. In terms of
curriculum, it influences their emphasis on developing curriculum based on children’s interests and using documentation to observe children, understand their interests, and to assess their learning and development. They observe and document children’s interests and provide educational opportunities based on these interests. They believe that it is very important to value children’s interests and ideas.

The teachers use documentation as an essential tool to understand children’s interests, thoughts, ideas and to understand changes in their development over time. The teachers’ documentation typically includes photographs and descriptive paragraphs and phrases interpreting the children’s ideas and development. Here is an example of a documentation panel the teachers constructed while I was there reflecting children’s interests and learning connected to space and Star Wars.

Photograph 4.1: Documentation Example
The documentation panel reflects children’s learning, interests, and ideas through the use of photographs of children’s play, their constructions, and children’s dialogue during play.

**Teachers’ Roles** The teachers primarily view themselves as facilitators and equal partners in their relationships with the children and teachers. Through describing her role in the classroom, Kathy states:

First – nurture, protect, the healthy growth and development of all children. Tuning to know what’s important to them. Knowing what their questions are. Being a facilitator and partner. Support – always for they journey they’re on. Not to direct. Environment prepared. Carefully documenting, conversation, play partner, partner with families. Look as equal in this relationship [Kathy – Interview Transcript, May 13, 2005]

Kathy’s descriptions align with the image of the teachers in Reggio Emilia particularly in terms of the important role of the teacher in preparing the environment, facilitating children’s learning, listening to children, documenting their learning, and communicating with children and families (Edwards et al., 1998). The teachers here also believe that it is important to also play with the children as Kathy describes as a “play partner.” However, the teachers limit their involvement as co-players with the children during superhero and gun play. Andrea states that they feel that this is something that the children are knowledgeable about and have a classroom of other children who are interested and capable and joining in with this play.
Kathy describes their roles in superhero play as

in superhero play we would want to be a presence, a supporter, a conversation partner, and/or a play partner, sometimes it would be mean just physically being close to...monitor kind of...we want to be close enough if the play needs a little nudge that we’re there to do it. If there needs to be some part of it...that losing definition, offer language, extend it, want them to do problem solving on a progression that has some conclusion...they get sort of stuck, you’re saying the same words over and over and it sounds like you’re stuck, feel like you’re trapped, give an image, help find a way to “unstuck themselves.”

[Kathy – Interview Transcript, May 13, 2005]

Kathy’s description highlights the important role teachers have in play, particularly superhero play that is sometimes described as imitative and repetitious (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Here she describes how it is important to observe and “monitor” the play and provide the necessary support whether it is some language, a way to extend the play, or providing support to “unstuck themselves” in play that might become repetitious. The teachers’ roles, including their roles in superhero play, is situational and dependent on the given play context, scenario, or situation. The teachers, however, describe challenges as teacher educators to help support the practicum students as they develop their role as a teacher in the classroom.

They state that the practicum students often face challenges learning how to balance the role as a co-player and enforcing limits. These challenges will be described in part in the following section that describes how the school is a site for teacher preparation and research and how this is an important aspect of the teachers’ professional values.
Teacher Preparation and Research

As part of the teacher education program, the teachers have the undergraduate practicum students and the graduate M.Ed. students use documentation to research about children’s interests. The students record observations, record conversations and analyze the children’s play and interests, and conduct a case study about one child. The students bring their documentation and their questions and concerns to weekly seminars. Each seminar addresses classroom issues, the students’ questions and concerns, and curriculum planning. Each quarter the teachers construct curricular ideas with the practicum students. The teachers model how to use a curricular web to explore possible curriculum ideas. During curriculum planning, the students and teachers brainstorm ideas for further investigation based on the children’s interests and the possibility for in-depth exploration of a particular topic. After a couple weeks, the students, with the teachers’ guidance, select several interests from the children to develop curriculum in the classroom. The students then develop lesson plans based on the different topics aligned with four curricular areas: Symbolic Languages, Physical Knowledge, Literacy, and Dramatic Play.
During each of the four quarters I was there, the topic of superheroes was brought up by the practicum students as a possible curricular possibility, however, it was never selected as a topic to pursue during any of the quarters.

During the seminars, the practicum students share many different topics. Frequently, the students bring up the issue of guidance and discipline in the classroom. The practicum students often asked questions and raised concerns about guidance and discipline in relation to superhero play. During an interview, Andrea discussed the challenges some practicum students face, particularly in relationship to issues of guidance and discipline. While the teachers typically view themselves as play partners with the children, they limit their role as a player when children are engaged in superhero or gun play. The teachers stated that one of the biggest reasons they limit their role as a player in superhero play is because of having the practicum students.
…We’ve had problems in the past with untrained teachers coming in trying to be a part of this play and not knowing the parameters of it and then really, really escalating it out of it to where, and then where they’re like, “Well, well all of sudden we were playing then 19 kids jumped on me… I don’t know what happened!” [Andrea – Interview Transcript, March 4, 2005]

They also have the practicum students limit their time getting involved in this play due to the limited amount of time they have in the classroom. The practicum students spend 8 hours a week in the classroom during the 10-week quarter. Additionally, they feel that it is difficult for the practicum students to learn the delicate balance between being the teacher and being a co-player.

And also a depth of understanding that I think they don’t have yet… most of them… in their academic career they’ve heard about some bits and pieces, but as far as pulling it together and being able to apply this to practice in a comprehensive kind of way, it’s not working for them yet, so, we need to be really careful about how we nurture that along for them, that balance of adult and co-player role, and for a lot of them, it takes more than one quarter [Kathy–Interview Transcript – March 4, 2005].

Thus, the teachers value the role of being a co-player, but limit this role in this setting as they are also a model for the practicum students. They believe that becoming a co-player with children is something that takes time to develop and the practicum students are only there for a short period of time, typically 10 week. The limited time the practicum students have in the classroom is also a challenge for them and teachers due to their strong belief in the importance of relationships and how relationships develop over time.

Maintaining appropriate practices through integrating standards. In the broader educational context, there is a strong emphasis on standards in education at both the state (Ohio) and federal level. The teachers incorporate the standards into their curriculum and discuss how to do this with the practicum students and at early childhood conferences.
At the NAEYC conference in 2005, Kathy and Andrea shared their perspective on how standards can be incorporated into superhero play. They shared several examples from the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards and demonstrated how teachers can directly connect the standards to the children playing superhero play.

Incorporating your state, district or school’s standards into authentic superhero play

- Ohio Learning Content Standards Example

- Research
  - “Ask questions about experiences, areas of interest, pictures, letters, words, logos or icons.”
  - “Use a variety of resources to gather information with assistance.”
  - “Share findings of information about a topic dictated or constructed by child.”

- Geometry and spatial sense
  - “Match identical two- and three-dimensional objects found in the environment in play situations.”
  - “Demonstrate and begin to use the language of the relative position of objects in the environment and play situations.”
  - “Sort, order and classify objects by one attribute.”
  - “Identify, copy, extend and create simple patterns or sequences of sounds, shapes and motions in the context of daily activities and play.”

Figure 4.2: Integrating Standards in Superhero Play

Through this discussion they shared several examples of situations where children are playing superheroes and are engaged in learning that reflects the standards. They argue that through play, including superhero play, the children are actively learning and that teachers in early childhood can and should continue to have children play and that play is not antithetical to standards; standards can be integrated through backmapping and documentation.
The teachers describe using “backmapping” to look backwards at what the children did during play, including superhero play, and they connect with the curriculum as well as the standards.

Observing and documenting superhero play allows you to ensure content coverage. If you find critical content areas are missing, then teachers can design authentic classroom experiences to “fill in the blanks.” [Andrea and Kathy Paper presentation at the NAEYC Conference, December 2005].

The teachers also shared an example from a previous year. Similarly to this year, in the past they had a number of children who were interested in playing superheroes. The children spent a long time in the block area. The teachers had some concerns that the children were not engaging in multiple forms of representation, such as various artistic opportunities in the art studio. The teachers incorporated the children’s interest in superheroes into the art studio by offering the opportunity for children to create their own action figures. They put out a number of different materials including aluminum foil and pipe cleaners and invited children to participate in this opportunity. They found that the children became very interested in this idea and engaged with different materials and representations than they had previously.

The school culture values of democratic practices, relationships, and professional values including teacher preparation and research, influence the construction of the activities and routines in the culture. For example, because the teachers value relationships and choices, the children may select their own seats at lunch next to their peers. Together, the teachers’ values influence the everyday activities and routines in the
classroom such having extensive periods of time for play and incorporating children’s interests through allowing children to bring in toys from home. As a culture, these values are reflected in not just the everyday activities and routines, but also through the language they use in the life of the classroom.

Language

Every culture has and uses language as a tool (Vygotsky, 1978). Language is socially and culturally constructed in specific contexts. While English is used as the primary language, the school culture has also created its own words or phrases that are used within this context. In the description of the school culture’s activities and routines, some of the school culture’s language was explained through describing the context, such as home toys, save sign, and plug-in. Other terms, such as “making plans” and “sharing ideas” were described in the description of the school culture’s values.

Other words are essential aspects of the school culture and are important to understand the construction of the peer culture group, such as everyday vs. someday teachers.

In the school culture, there are many adults other than just the teachers because the school is a teaching and research setting. Therefore, there are frequently assistant teachers, undergraduate practicum students, graduate student teachers and researchers participating in the classroom. Many of the adults, such as the practicum students, only come to classroom one day per week for one quarter. It is important for young children to have consistency in their daily routines, and having different adults come in and out of the classroom can disrupt the children’s routines. Thus, the teachers describe the different type of adults as “everyday teachers” or “someday” teachers. The “everyday teachers”
are present daily and include the primary teachers and teacher assistants. The “someday teachers” are there on some of the days, but not everyday.

The following table defines important words that are used regularly in the school culture context. These words are important to understand not only the school culture, but also the peer culture as it is part of the school culture and they often use and sometimes contest the use or practice behind these words, such as making plans, as will be described in the peer culture perspective.

Language of the School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/Phrase</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Toys</td>
<td>Toys that children bring from home. There are certain times of the day when home toys can be used in combination with the school toys. Limits are established based on how the children use the toys. During the time I was there limits were placed on the superhero type toys, Barbies, and Bratz dolls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save Sign</td>
<td>Saved signs are created by the children to indicate they want a particular item, usually a block structure, to be left constructed. Children will write their name (sometimes with invented spelling) and sometimes draw or place a small photograph of themselves on the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Day</td>
<td>The school is a year-round school with a multi-age classroom. Children enter and leave the program at various times due to variations in acceptance to the program, transitioning to kindergarten, or transitioning to a different program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someday Teacher</td>
<td>Someday teachers include assistant teachers and practicum students who are there on some but not all of the days of the week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday Teacher</td>
<td>Everyday teachers are teachers and assistant teachers who are there everyday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinoland</td>
<td>Dinoland is a wooden box that has been painted. The open side faces into the classroom and contains some items connected to dinosaur play, such as dinosaurs, vegetation, and hills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-Same</td>
<td>The children and teachers often say “same-same” and use the sign for “same” to refer to something that is the same or very similar. Examples include clothing items, toys, and pages in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Plans</td>
<td>The teachers have established with the children a format for the children to negotiate the sharing of school toys and items from home. The children “make plans” by asking the peer who has the desired item, “I want to make a plan for _______.“ The children typically negotiate a specific time to share the item. Frequently, but not always, the children ask a teacher to tell them when it is time or to have them help in the negotiation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doghouse</td>
<td>In the Autumn 2004, a M.Ed. student brought in connected boxes, which looked like a doghouse for the children to paint, based on their interests in dog-type play. The house was frequently used for this play, but also for hiding from other peers and teachers. It was also often a site for more “rough-and-tumble” play such as grabbing at people as they walked by, hiding and finding through a small flap on the side of the box, and kicking or grabbing at a peer from a side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell Ringer</td>
<td>The person who plays the xylophone and announces any important information to the group, such as a warning for cleaning up or to put on clothes to be ready to go outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes Alert</td>
<td>Clothes Alert is a phrase used to announce that it is time to put on any clothes the children have removed while playing, including putting on their shoes to go outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Ideas</td>
<td>Working ideas are the ideas the teachers put out for the children to participate in. Working ideas are also referred to when children are engaged in something in-depth such as working in the studio or at one of the tables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Idea</td>
<td>The children share something they want to with the other children at circle. Usually it is an item they have brought from home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plug-In</td>
<td>The children put their hand on the wall of the building as they walk outside. Plugging-in is way for the teachers to help keep the children next to the wall and away from the street.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Language in the School Culture

This section described the school culture in terms of the activities and routines, values, and language. This rich description illustrates important aspects of the school culture that are essential to understand when describing the construction of the peer
culture interested in superheroes. The development of the school culture is ongoing and influenced by not only the teachers in the classroom, but also the children involved. This is particularly evident here as the teachers developed new limits on superhero play with their particular group of children. In the following section, I share my analysis of the teachers’ perspectives on superhero play.

**Teachers’ Perspectives on Superhero Play**

What are the teachers’ perspectives on superhero play? Some of the teachers’ views on superhero play are evident through aspects of the school culture. Throughout the study, the teachers and I discussed their perspective on superhero play. These discussions occurred on a daily basis in the classroom, in formal interviews, and during the seminars with the undergraduate students. We also presented our multiple perspectives on superhero play together at the 2005 NAEYC Annual Conference and Expo. The teachers believe that superhero play is a phenomenon that the children are interested in and therefore it is important to support the children’s interest. They mentioned that this is an interest of not just this group, but it has been an interest of many children over time. The teachers believe that superhero play is an important type of play that can be incorporated into the curriculum. Some critical parts of this play are problem solving, negotiation and conflict resolution. I have analyzed and interpreted the teachers’ perspectives using information from multiple sources including interviews, conversations, and observations. In this section, I analyze teachers’ perspectives on superhero play related to: (1) valuing children’s interests, (2) an opportunity for power,
(3) personal challenges and professional challenges, (4) gender, (5) inclusion/exclusion, and (6) in relationship to violent play.

*Superhero Play - Valuing Children’s Interests*

The teachers value the interests of children and acknowledge that many of their interests are connected to aspects of popular culture. Andrea describes the children’s social interactions connected to popular culture as similar to adults discussing popular culture at the “water cooler” in the office. Thus, popular culture interests are interests of many human beings and as such they feel they need to respect these interests of the children too. Kathy describes how it is important to value this interest in superheroes because it is actually a part of the child.

Kathy – Why would you choose to take a part of somebody’s life and ban it, forbid it, you know…it’s part of them [March 4, 2005 interview]. Thus, Kathy questions the practice of banning or limiting children’s interests from the early childhood classroom; in this case their interests in superheroes.

The teachers view the relationships between the children and teachers as an interconnected classroom community. As such, the teachers believe that it is important for them to not only value the children’s interests, but also to become knowledgeable about these interests as well. The teachers often watch the popular television shows or current movies the children are interested in. Andrea says that they do this because they want to understand the children’s interests, “Or else we won’t know what they’re talking about!” [Andrea – Interview, March 4, 2005]. The teachers are knowledgeable about the concept of peer culture based on previous studies of peer culture in the school, their own
educational experiences, and through their experiences with young children. The teachers believe peer cultures are important and that they are an important part of children’s socialization and social development. On a related note, the teachers believe that popular culture knowledge is an important way that children are often able to access entry into a peer culture group.

The teachers also believe that it is important to integrate peer culture interests into the school culture, such as through curriculum planning. The teachers also believe that children’s ability to socialize and function in a peer culture group directly relates to their ability to interact and participate in small group work and projects in the school culture. Andrea describes this link

Andrea – If you can’t function socially, you can’t write a book about Superman. If you can’t function in the peer culture then you can’t work on a group project. [March 4, 2005]

Thus, the teachers view the peer culture and school culture as interconnected and that peer cultures are an important part of children learning how to interact socially. They also believe that superhero play is important for children individually, such as providing children an opportunity to have power.

*Opportunity for Power*

The teachers value superhero play as a part of the peer culture, particularly in relationship to children’s social development, but they also believe it is an important aspect of their emotional development, especially related to an opportunity to have and explore ideas about power. The teachers describe power in relation to superhero play in several different ways. Kathy describes superhero play as power play. She highlights this

147
aspect of the play as central to this type of play. She describes power play as play in which children explore powerful ideas and take on powerful roles that they do not usually have access to in their everyday lives. Other examples of power play that Kathy and Andrea have observed the children playing include playing lions/tigers, Lion King, and dinosaurs.

The teachers believe this type of play is interesting and engaging to children because of these opportunities to explore power. The children are able to explore power as they stretch their physical limits when they are running, jumping, and kicking. The children are also able to explore power as they interact and socialize with other peers. They are also able to explore power as they engage in play that explores strong topics such as life and death, good vs. evil, and dangerous situations that could hurt people in real life.

The teachers also believe the limits on superhero play during this particular year were also providing an opportunity for children to experience the power of monitoring their own behavior and their peers too.

At circle time you have to put that behind your back and that gives them ownership of the school and another kind of power that’s different from jumping off the climber again and again., shooting webs, so if someone said, “Ah he has out that robot, I think we would put it on the children to figure out and decide.” [Andrea – March 4, 2005 Interview].

Thus, the teachers also relate the children’s interests and needs to explore power to their construction of school culture practices, such as the negotiation of limits in the classroom and the power for the children to solve problems and situations as they arise in the classroom. As described earlier, the limits were developed based on the children’s needs
and the situation at the time, but the limit and how they existed in the classroom were flexible and dependent on the individual situations.

While the teachers value superhero play as something children are interested in and an important part of their peer culture, as well as for emotional needs including power, the teachers also express challenges toward this type of play. These challenges are both professional and personal, particularly for Kathy.

*Personal Challenges and Professional Challenges*

While the teachers are supportive of superhero play, they also face professional challenges in relationship to integrating superhero play in the classroom. In interviews and conversations, the teachers have discussed professional challenges they are feeling as educators in relationship to current educational climate emphasizing educational standards, accountability, and school readiness for preschool children. During an interview both teachers used language related to superheroes, in reference to these education issues.

Andrea- “We’ll fight the Power”

Kathy – “We’ll put on our capes and yield a Lego and get ‘em”

[Interview, March 4, 2005]

While these comments may have been made in jest about the current climate, they do reflect their professional feelings of advocacy for what they believe is right for children in early childhood. Their values and curricular practices, such as using documentation to illustrate how superhero play can be connected to educational standards, reflects the
concrete ways they are able to align their educational practices to mandates from the state and federal government.

The teachers mention that in relationship to superhero play, they often have to discuss and explain their perspective to parents, particularly their views about popular culture and the general role of play in an early childhood classroom.

Kathy – Weave into our teacher training and with parents – an important thing in this is how we as adults react. You need to be shock proof. Lots of times they’ll hear a phrase, “Hey, I’m sexy.” It’s new and they’ll just try it on, but if we react strongly and make it a big deal then it becomes a big deal [Interview Transcript – March, 4, 2005].

They mentioned that over time they have noticed a shift in parents’ concerns. During the time of this study, the teachers noted that parents were concerned about preparing their children for kindergarten or being able to read, where earlier they heard more concerns about children’s school readiness in relation to social development. With these issues, the teachers state that it is important for them to able to share their views and perspectives of children and child development, and how play and aspects of popular culture can be an important part of curriculum. For this purpose, they also use documentation to communicate to parents how and what children are learning through play.

The teachers describe how they are able to coordinate their curriculum and responsibilities as a teacher training site together with the children’s interests in superhero play. Along with these professional challenges, Kathy also expressed some personal challenges she has faced, particularly when superhero play involves gun play. Kathy described her personal feelings about gun play, which is sometimes a part of superhero play, during an interview.
Personally, it’s hard. Anything...gun play...pushes buttons in me where I can’t even find words to describe it...[sigh]...it’s very hard... but...I understand it enough that I can let it happen. And keep that...button pushing that is happening inside me [hesitant laugh]. keep it...from getting out [I asked her “Why?” She went on to describe her experience living near Kent State and learning about what had happened.] So there was those kinds of things, but there were unbelievable stuff happening...like Kent State, like assassinations, and like my brother going to Vietnam. So...so that was a hard time. And, that coincided in my life with that time in life-span development, where you’re figuring out your values [raised intonation], trying out your [inaudible??], that late adolescent stuff that so that’s why the gun play...makes me......sick. [short, hesitant laugh] So...but, it’s okay. [tone of voice becomes higher, particularly on “kay”]

[Kathy – Teacher Interview, March 4, 2005]

In this transcript, Kathy shares her personal feelings about gun play. She has strong feelings as expressed through her use of the phrases, “pushes buttons in me” and “makes me…sick.” I think her personal challenges are significant because it may represent the conflict many teachers feel about this type of play. While many teachers will not have the same personal connections and history around guns and violence as Kathy has had, those events and others like them have impacted many people and their feelings about guns and violence. Some adults and teachers state, “I don’t like guns.” Much of the controversy surrounding superhero play resides with its relationship to gun play and violence. Thus, this quote may address the personal feelings teachers might have about this controversial topic. She emphasized both her professional and personal feelings. This was one of the first circumstances in which these personal feelings had been expressed to me. Most often, the teachers described comments related to their professional knowledge, as Andrea emphasized in the interview. Following Kathy’s discussion, I queried about Andrea’s experiences too. Andrea redirected the discussion into some of the experiences and challenges they have had with practicum students engaging in this type of play with
the students. Thus, this personal connection could be stronger for Kathy. Also, it could be possible that Andrea wants to emphasize her professional knowledge over her personal feelings. Another possibility is that Andrea’s professional knowledge and personal feelings more closely align than Kathy’s.

Gender

While the teachers had some differences in terms of personal and professional challenges, the teachers expressed similar views about gender in relationship to superhero play. During an interview, Andrea stated that each year they see the children dividing themselves by gender and that the boys more often will play in the block area and the girls will more often play in the house area [Interview, May 13, 2005]. In this interview, she said they do not have any gender bias in their school and that “we would never say this is where boys can play and this is where girls can play.” [Interview, May 13, 2005]. Andrea said that she believes that the children sometimes become more involved and attracted to gender based toys based on their families’ perspectives, the toys they have at home, and from viewing media programs that give images of what they are supposed to like, such as “pink sparkly things.”

Kathy also shares a similar perspective. She states that children sometimes use gender to exclude and sometimes this comes from gender bias in their families. She states that she offers another perspective to the children.
Brings some reality to another perspective that maybe they didn’t have. Some family values are gender biased. They have to know about that and think about that. Children are capable of having different modes of function at home then when they’re at a public school, we’re a public place. Our expectation is while they’re here - common ground that works for everyone. [Kathy Interview, May 13, 2005]

Kathy followed-up from stating that they have had families specifically state that they brought their children to this program, because their children were participating in other programs that were gender-biased. “We’ve had people bring their children to us because of that. We’ve had people be at schools where they’ve said, they only have the girls do girl things and the boys do boy things.” [Kathy Interview, May 13, 2005]

Andrea also states that children often use salient features, such as gender, as a means to exclude children from play.

“It’s convenient to say, “No, you can’t play. Batman’s a boy” [Andrea, Interview, May 13, 2005]

Gender is one feature the children used to exclude children from play. The following section further examines the teachers’ perspectives on inclusion and exclusion in children’s play.

*Inclusion/Exclusion*

The teachers are familiar with various literature examining inclusion and exclusion in children’s play and social relationships. Andrea says she tries to find a balance between Corsaro’s (1985) view of exclusion from the protection of interactive space and Vivian Paley’s (1992) perspective of “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play.” Andrea explains:
To say “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play” is kind of a false environment. I think there is a difference between that and what is respectful. There are times, “Not everybody gets to play your idea” There are reasons they say “you can’t play.” They don’t want it to fall apart…It’s also very powerful to say, “You can’t do this.”

[Interview, May 13, 2005]

In this transcript, Andrea is explaining the tension between being inclusive and letting all children play together with allowing children to develop social groups and friendships based on similar interests. By saying that Paley’s (1992) concept of “You Can’t Say You Can’t Play” reflects a “false environment” argues that in social relationships we don’t expect all people to interact together and for everyone to always be included in whatever they might want to be involved in. Social relationships involve negotiations, relationships, and construction of shared meanings and understandings.

Kathy agrees with Andrea’s perspective and argues that when children exclude others from play it is really important to understand the children and the circumstances as sometimes some children will exclude children, but not have a valid reason for the exclusion.

It’s a tricky balance. Because sometimes the reason that somebody is being told that is a good reason. Maybe the space that they’re in the climber and really you can’t fit a lot of people in there so there could be a valid kind of reason. I think it goes back to depth of relationships and a deeper understanding of these children and these circumstances. And we do have some children for not such valid reason exclude children.

[Kathy Interview, May 13, 2005]

Both teachers state that sometimes it is difficult for them and for the practicum students when children exclude others. Andrea says that the children often will choose a salient feature to exclude, such as saying you can’t play because your “skin’s dark” or
“you’re fat” or something “easier” such as, “you’re not wearing red” [Interview, May 13, 2005]. Kathy agrees and says as a teacher it is often more difficult for them because it requires the practicum students to understand the individual children and the specific circumstance. As stated above, it also requires knowing the children over time.

Sometimes there will be a victim of exclusionary words. Sometimes it seems harder to us than it is to the children. We want to children who are using those words to tell us more about that. If they need a cape help them find a cape...If it's a character judgment or something that really isn’t fair...then it’s a different kind of situation. This is confusing for our students sometimes because they’ll think that there is one right way, but there isn’t one right way. There are lots of ways. In the same way that children don’t need the same servings of food they don’t need the same...sometimes it’s just standing there...if you don’t know the children you don’t know. [Interview, May 13, 2005]

In this transcript, Kathy further describes the challenges, not only as a teacher, but as a teacher educator for the practicum students in how to assist them to understand how to teach and work with children. She highlights one of the teachers’ primary values, the importance of relationships and how it really requires knowing the children individually and over time to know how and what to do in a given situation.

*Relationship to Violent Play*

Earlier, I presented Kathy’s personal challenges related to gun play. In a follow-up interview, she further explained these challenges and specifically discussed violence in relationship to her perspective on power play.
It’s hard, it’s hard. And you see the violence in the world…and you see a kid got stabbed by their father, what the heck is that, and I hope the kids haven’t seen that on the news, but I’m not sure how they could have missed it. Violence overall is really just a troubling issue, but I don’t look at power play. I don’t equate power play with violence. I don’t equate having guns with being a problem-solver. I think those are, if we can empower children in ways that enable them to solve problems and think through their problems, that, that, you don’t need a weapon to do that. And that’s what’s going to save us. That’s what’s going to be ok, but I think that we do have to, all of us, look at the media, look at some of the, some of the kids movies are appalling. I know they pack theaters with them. We need...more richer than violence, this isn’t about violence. This is about power play and finding the fantasy, the fantasy to help you build the real strength. You know, and work through issues and all that, I don’t think it’s about violence.  

[Interview, May 13, 2005]

Kathy states that children’s superhero play (power play) is not about violence. Through analyzing this quote that Kathy believes that power play is about power, fantasy, and working through social and emotional issues. She also states that we do need to think about what children are exposed to, such as the violent movies available in the popular culture.

The teachers’ perspectives on superhero play align with their values. They believe in the importance of valuing and supporting children’s interests and in democratic values of choice and giving children a voice in the daily life of the school. These beliefs carryover to superhero play and they work together to support the children’s interests in this, even when this play is challenging for personal reasons as Kathy expressed and with professional challenges to connect children’s play with education standards.

This section answered the questions, “How is superhero play an aspect of the school culture” and “What are the teachers’ perspectives of superhero play?” through an in-depth analysis of school culture’s activities and routines, the school culture values and
language, and specifically the teachers’ perspectives on superhero play. The school culture is constructed based on the values of the teachers involved, and plays out through the activities, routines, and practices in the daily lives of the school. These practices, however, are also dependent on the other participants in the context, in this case, the families and the children primarily. The children participate in the school culture context and influence how these practices play out. They also construct their own peer cultures that have their own set of values, concerns, and practices. The following section will describe one of the peer culture groups in this classroom, the group interested in superheroes. There were also other peer culture groups and all of these groups intersected with each other and with the school culture. These intersections will be described in the subsequent section.

**Superhero Play in the Peer Culture**

Here, I examine the research question, “How is superhero play an aspect of children’s peer culture life?” Corsaro (1985) defines peer culture as “common activities and routines, artifacts, values, concerns and attitudes” (p. 171). According to Corsaro, while peer cultures are often constructed within school cultures they are distinctive from school cultures and sometimes in opposition to the school culture. In this school, there were three primary peer cultures that I am referring to as “the superheroes”, “the kitties”, and “the princesses.” There were primary players in each group and several children who intermingled between groups.
In this section I will describe the primary children involved in the peer culture group centered on superheroes. Then I will describe features of the peer culture group in this classroom that was interested in superheroes and superhero play following Corsaro’s categories of peer culture aligned with my analysis using Spradley’s (1980) taxonomic analysis. I will describe superhero play from a peer culture perspective in the following categories: Becoming a Member, Artifacts, and Superhero Play Narrative.

**Individuals in the Peer Culture**

As a peer culture group, there were four boys who were primary members of the peer culture group interested in superheroes: Ron, Donovan, Brian, and Alan. Other children also expressed interest at different times, such as Carlos, Anthony, Nick, and Lien, however the four boys showed consistent interest in superheroes during my time attending the school. The four boys shared several common reasons for their interests in superheroes as described in the peer culture section including, the opportunity to be a leader, to have control, to connect with peers, and as a way to express care about their same sex friends. However, each of these boys also had their own individual connections to their interest in superheroes. In this section I analyze each boy in terms of their individual connection to superheroes. This is important because it provides another layer of understanding of the meaning of superhero play from not just the group level, but at the individual level.
Ron is a five-year old African-American boy. According to the teachers, Ron came into the school on his first day wearing a full Batman costume and said, “R-O-N spells Batman.” This established Ron as the main lover and leader of the superhero interest. Ron demonstrates his interest in superheroes through play and also through the superhero artifacts and knowledge he brings to the classroom. Almost every day I was there Ron brought in at least one superhero artifact ranging from wearing a Batman costume, carrying a large Batman pillow, bringing in a backpack with all of the action figures from the Incredibles. When he brings them in, many of the other children interested in superheroes and sometimes others go over to him to see what he has brought.

Kathy describes Ron in relationship to superhero play as someone who needs the opportunity to have power due to issues in his life that are often out of his control. Before I arrived in the classroom, the teachers expressed that Ron often had difficulty managing his emotions. Sometimes he would cry, scream, kick, and/or hit his classmates in response to something that upset him. The teachers sometimes needed to remove him from the group for periods of time to provide him with the opportunity to regain control of himself for his safety and for the safety of the other children in the class. Due to this behavior, Ron sometimes had difficulty entering in and maintaining play. However, superhero play was different for Ron. For Ron, superhero play provides him with a way to have power, be a leader, and be part of a peer group. Kathy describes how superhero play has provided him with the opportunity to demonstrate his strengths.
Ron IS superhero play. And he is such an interesting guy. And I think especially for someone in his circumstance, I don’t know how much I can say on here, um, who has had some difficult life situations, that he, more than typically developing children, needs to feel some strength, some power. Something that he can, he can point to as, “Yeah, but, I’m powerful.” Um, we’ve recognized this from the start. And we’ve tried to accommodate his, those needs for him…inaudible…the people who are raising him…so for him I think it’s supremely important to have these times that he can jump and be loud and be in charge, and he has come so far with his leadership skills in the last few months, certainly in the last year, but in the last few months now when he arrives it’s like the mother duck is here and we’ve all got to line up and do it and he’s uh, really got some strength of personality that’s been able to come out [Kathy – Interview May 31, 2005].

Thus, for Ron, superhero play is a primary way for him to demonstrate strengths and have power and control that he doesn’t have in some other aspects of his life. Ron and Donovan, who will be described next, often play together and refer to each other as “best friends.”

Donovan has been in the program since he was an infant. He is a four-year-old European-American boy. When I first started my observations he was three-years old. Donovan has a lot of popular culture knowledge about superheroes. Through conversations and play, he has discussed the sources of his knowledge through watching various televisions programs, movies, and playing video games at homes. Like Ron, he also has many superhero artifacts including lunchboxes, action figures, games, etc… He frequently shares his items from home; however he is also very cautious about his items and initially did not share these special items according to his teachers.
Donovan, so I think Donovan being one of the youngest kids too, and just wait til
Jordan and Eric come, because they are going to be power play people, I can tell
you right now, so for Donovan to be, to find that commonality with the Carlos’s
and the Brian’s in the world, this has been the avenue for that, which is one of the
glorious parts of mixed-age grouping. So and all the other things too about
problem-solving. He’s um, I think, it’d be interesting to look back on your earlier
observations, it seems to be that he’s become much less fragile. When he first
came in the room, had a fragile nature, not totally, but, um, his boat got rocked a
lot more easily early on and I think he’s developing some chutzpah, some, uh,
reserve of strength that he can call on. He still has his fragile moments, as a young
child would, but I think that this kind of play has given him a chance to find some
strength that he wouldn’t have found painting, you know, or. Um, I don’t know,
using manipulatives, or sensory table. I think this more powerful play has drawn
from him some strength [Kathy – Interview notes – May 31, 2005]

Through my observations, I noticed that Donovan often takes on roles in play that are
considered as support roles to the leader roles, which are usually played by Ron.
However, during the summer of 2005, Ron was absent more frequently due to taking
vacations or spending time with his family. During this time, I observed Donovan taking
on more leader roles and leading the play more often too. The following is one example
of Donovan being a leader without the main “superhero group”

The children are in a Star Wars plane they have created out of the classroom
blocks. It is the first morning play time. The children involved include Donovan,
Lien, Adrianna, Nala, and Ashanta.

A practicum teacher and a teacher assistant are on climber on the other side of the
block area watching the children.

Ashanta – Everybody silence, Donovan…(inaudible)
Donovan – Silence! (puts arm toward Ashanta). I only get to talk.
Donovan- Only me and Ashanta can talk round.
Ashanta – And no talking when the teachers coming.
Donovan – Only we get to talk and
Ashanta – Yeah, we have…
Donovan – Just stop talking already (puts arm to Ashanta).
Ashanta turns around
[Ashanta and Donovan are in the front of the climber. They are pretending to drive the ship]

Donovan starts singing Star Wars theme [Da..da…da da da daaaa…da da da da]
Donovan (to Ashanta) – I’m making the music.
Donovan – I don’t want any of you talking so get out! Or then you, or you’ll fall in space.

Donovan – I see the Sith ship.
Kelly (teacher assistant) comes over to observe.
Alan is now watching from the cubbies. He leaves after a minute and paces back and forth.
Jordan joins the group.

Donovan – We’re in the Sith’s planet so we have to get out.

Ron and Brian arrive. Alan calls, “Brian, Brian, Brian!” and runs over to him.
Everyone leaves the ship.
Donovan – Put your light saber out.
Donovan jumps
The other girls follow.
[Field notes, July 28, 2005]

Here, Donovan is able to use his knowledge of Star Wars to lead and direct the play.

Also, in this situation, the dynamics were different as he was leading a group of girls in the class who often play in different groups. This could be because it was still early in the day and the children were playing with other children in other peer culture groups, since there were a limited number of children in the classroom. After this, when Ron, Alan, and Brian arrived, the play shifted and Ron took on the lead. I noticed this on other occasions too.

Today Donovan was the leader. During both the morning and afternoon Donovan was seen as the leader of the play. The children asked him what they could be and followed his lead. Ron arrived and everything shifted.
[Field Notes, July 6, 2005]
Thus, in play Donovan seems to choose the supportive roles in play to be able to play with his peers and be part of the group, even though he wants to be the leader. He takes other opportunities through play with other peers to take on these leadership roles. These decisions by him may demonstrate how important supportive roles are in a group play situation. Like Donovan, Brian also often takes on supportive roles frequently the “bad guy.”

Brian

Brian is a five-year-old biracial boy. His mother is African-American and his father is European-American. Brian also has popular culture knowledge of superheroes. Through conversations, comments during play, and bringing in artifacts such as action figures or wearing clothes with superhero characters, Brian has demonstrated this knowledge. In the classroom, Brian is active. He sometimes needs reminders from his teachers to choose an activity or area of the classroom instead of moving around the room. Kathy describes Brian as someone who uses his knowledge of superheroes to be able to become part of the peer group and also engages in superhero play to be active.

For other children I think there is, I’m thinking of Brian, he also needs that “in” socially. And to help him in his relationships and that overture into play. In superhero play he can make that overture much easier then if it was something else that was not so easy for him to grasp. And for him it’s important for the physical part. He really needs to be physically active, more so than typically developing children and I think to have these kinds of play available for him, not for every minute of the day, but for enough to satisfy his body, I think it’s really important for him. In that way. [Kathy – Interview notes – May 31, 2005]
During the year, the teachers sometimes provided support for Brian to get involved in the play. In this instance, Brian was running from area to area in the classroom, but not getting involved in play. Andrea sat with him and helped him to observe the play scenario starting in the block area. She described what was happening in the play and then asked him what role he thought he could play. He eventually chose Wonder Woman.

As members of this peer culture group, Ron, Donovan, and Brian, all had access to popular culture knowledge through various artifacts, television series, and movies outside of school. They brought this knowledge to the classroom and this shared interest became a link between these three boys. Alan, on the other hand, did not have access to popular culture knowledge outside of the classroom.

**Alan**

Alan is a four year old boy who started in this program in September 2004. When he started the program he spoke primarily in Chinese and had limited knowledge of the English language. He also has limited knowledge of superhero narratives due to not watching many cartoons or movies associated with these characters. When Alan first started in the program Alan was initially excluded from the group due to the way he interacted with them.

Over time, he was able to observe, watch, and learn about the superhero narrative to become a key player in the superhero peer culture group. Through this play, he demonstrates strengths in his social and physical abilities, communication, and he expresses strong feelings of self-worth. Through this play he found a place to demonstrate strengths that were not initially visible to his peers, teachers, parents, and possibly himself. He positioned himself against the discourse being prescribed to him by
the peer culture group and was able to not only access the group, but to become a leader in the play (Davies, 2003).

And then there are children like Alan, who, um, a few months ago couldn’t speak English. Well, look at what power play has done for him in far as developing conversation skills and negotiation skills and just understanding other people and what their ideas are. He’s had to listen, he’s had to respond, and it’s all working beautifully. He’s a powerful guy. You know, for him, I think there’s been a lot of the usual advantages to most play and certainly power play, but also that, what do I want to say, like a prescriptive for language, like um, it makes it more interesting, more important for him to develop this language.

[Kathy – Interview notes – May 31, 2005]

During a video revisiting session, Alan expressed his feelings about the importance of leaders from his perspective.

Alan – If I had a green sword that means I’m the leader.
Jeannie – If you a green sword you’re a leader. So in Star Wars, people with the green swords are leaders?
Alan – Yeah.
Jeannie – So what do you like about being a leader?
Alan – Cause, I just want to be a leader when I grow up.
Jeannie – What do leaders do?
Lien – They don’t be in trouble, they just homework.
Alan – Nut uh.
Jeannie – What do leaders do Alan?
Alan – Well in Star Wars there’s three leaders
Me – Mmm hmm. And what do they do?
Lien – They fight
Alan – The leaders...
Lien pulls shirt down and it makes a noise.
Jeannie – What else do they do, because lots of people fight that aren’t leaders?
Alan – When Clone Man turns into a leader he will look like a leader but he’s really a leader dragon. And he’ll spit ice and water out and fire. And lightening.
Lien – Oooh!
Alan – And you know what else he can spit out?
Jeannie – What?
Alan – Lasers.
Jeannie – Lasers too?
[Video Revisiting Session – July 28, 2005]
Alan describes aspects of leadership through specific descriptions, such as “if you have a green sword you’re a leader” and how the leader spits out various things such as ice, water, fire, lightening, and lasers. Through this description, Alan’s voice reflects his excitement in the powerful aspects of these characters he describes as leaders. It also reflects the knowledge he has acquired about these characters and his ability to articulate his point of view in English.

Together, these boys created a peer culture group connected to superheroes. Other children, such as Carlos, Nick, Anthony, Lien, Olivia, and Samantha, were also sometimes actively involved in the group. Here I focused on the four boys as superheroes and superhero play seemed to be a primary interest for them and they frequently would play with each other. For the others, they were often involved in other play or other peer groups and superhero play did not seem to be a dominant interest for them. Thus, the four are primary members, but were not an exclusive peer culture group.

The peer culture group connected to superheroes was created over time and involved ongoing negotiations as a group. This varied over time as the children matured, interests in particular superheroes varied based on current movies or other popular culture influences, and as different children were involved in the group at any given time. The following section describes who the children were able to negotiate becoming a member in the peer culture group.
Becoming a Member

Superhero play is a form of pretend or make-believe play. Garvey (1990) describes essential aspects of make-believe play including determining roles and identities, developing a plan of action, and determining the necessary objects and settings, which may change during a given play scenario (p. 86). For this group, superhero play was a primary interest, thus, becoming a member of a group centered on many of these issues of pretend play. Becoming a member is a complex activity that involves negotiation of many issues. For this group and their interest in superhero play, becoming a member involved negotiations of the play, particularly the who, what, when, where, and the how the play was going to occur. The when and where were often the easiest to figure out, but the who, the what, and the how were more complicated and also intricately connected.

Typically, the when was decided at the moment the play began and would occur during one of the free play or outside play periods. Occasionally, the children decided and planned when they were going to play prior to the play session (e.g. planning to play outside while inside), but usually the children decided to play and started playing immediately. The where was also often fairly predictable or easy to negotiate. Inside, the play usually occurred in the block area, often on the climber. Outside, the play usually happened on the far climber, on the hill, or all over the playground if it involved a big chase. In order to become a member of the peer culture group, negotiations for membership centered on issues of knowledge, leadership, and gender.
Knowledge

The primary children of the peer culture group had significant knowledge of popular culture related to superheroes except for Alan. The children used this knowledge to position themselves as members in the peer culture group.

Children have and want to share information about what they know. For many children, they have a lot of knowledge about aspects of popular culture, in this case including superheroes. In the classroom, the children would frequently share what they knew about superheroes and would clarify information with each other. The following dialogue represents an example of this type of discussion.

Carlos: “The bad guys are very powerful but the Power Rangers have Megazords. The two Megazords fight together.”
Brian: “No, the mean and the good guys combine together.”
Carlos: “No, the two Megazords are never going to be friends. There’s two Megazords. One’s mean and one’s good.”

Here, both Carlos and Brian have a lot of information about Power Rangers. Carlos is able to articulate his knowledge about superheroes, and he also reflects the dichotomy between good and evil in his statement, “the two Megazords are never going to be friends” based on the fact that one is mean and one is good.

The children also want to gain knowledge and learn more about aspects of popular culture from their peers. This was particularly evident with Alan, who had limited access to popular culture in his home. At the beginning of an interview, I asked Alan to tell me about superheroes. He starts out stating that he doesn’t know a lot about superheroes.
Jeannie: Tell me about superheroes.
Alan: I don’t know a lot about superheroes.
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

However, by the end of the interview he shared lots of information

Alan: And I like to be Martian Manhunter…Um, he’s invisible that’s why
Jeannie: What can he do if he’s invisible?
Alan: People can’t see him so they don’t know where he is, but he’s there.
Jeannie: Would you like to do that for real
Alan: No one can do that for real!
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

The children are also very knowledgeable about the status of who has the popular culture knowledge in the peer culture group.

Jeannie: So what characters in Star Wars do you like to be?
Nick: Two characters
Jeannie: Who?
Nick: Mmm…Ah…what is Donovan like to be?
Jeannie: Um, sometimes he likes to be Obi Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker
Nick: Yeah, I like Obi Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker and Luke Skywalker
[Interview with Nick, Transcript, June 1, 2005]

In this example, Nick references Donovan as a peer with status and knowledge of superheroes as he questions, “Who does Donovan like to be?” when playing Star Wars.

Ron was most often referenced as someone in the school that plays superheroes. He also was often referred to as someone the child learned information about superheroes from.

For example,

Jeanne: How did you learn about it?
Carlos: Because Ron told me that Batman can’t fly that he only uses the Bat rope.
[Interview Transcript, June 1, 2005]

Ron, as described above, was identified by many children and teachers as the leader or the primary player of superheroes. This was confirmed through many interviews.
with all children in the class. I asked, “Who likes to play superheroes?” A majority of the children responded, “Ron” as their first answer. In play, Ron primarily took on leadership roles in play and was able to use his extensive knowledge of superheroes to lead the play.

From a peer culture perspective, having knowledge about superheroes provides easier access and entry into becoming a member of the peer culture group (Kantor et al., 1989). This is demonstrated through Ron, Brian, and Donovan’s cases. However, Alan does not conform to this. He had limited knowledge and was able to gain entry to the peer culture group over time. Taking a feminist poststructural perspective, Alan was able to position himself as a member of the peer culture group despite having access to the popular culture knowledge.

During play, Alan takes on leader roles or roles that he thinks are positive such as Yoda in Star Wars [See Table 4.3: Roles in Superhero Play]. He was able to position himself in these roles by observing and learning about who were the leaders or roles that were powerful and rarely took on supportive roles. Using a different lens, we can understand how there are different ways to gain entry and access into the group.

Applying a Foucauldian lens, we can analyze children’s value of knowledge through connecting to the discourse of superheroes (1980). Foucault might argue that the children are being prescribed a set discourse of the characters and their roles and related strengths, such as leadership and assistantship. In this, Ron may be using his significant knowledge of superheroes to establish and maintain social relationships and perhaps a hierarchical relationship in which he has the primary power and is then able to designate power to his assistants. Using Foucault’s (1980) idea that discourse has both constraints
and possibilities, Alan may be afforded more possibilities due to having less access and
therefore, perhaps, less constraints from the prescribed discourse of the superhero
narrative.

Thus, having knowledge of the superhero characters and the superhero narrative
supports entry and access into the peer culture group (Kantor et al., 1989), however, it is
not a determinant of access to the group. Alan’s individual case and examining the issue
from multiple perspectives provides additional insight into the complexities of
negotiating entry and acquiring access into a peer culture group. In this peer culture
group, leadership was an important aspect of both being a member and playing
superheroes.

Leadership

The children who had knowledge about superheroes and superhero play had
greater ability to access and take on leadership roles. This section describes how the
children were able to access certain roles in play based on their knowledge and
relationships in the peer culture group, as well as analyzing the children’s interest in
leaders and leadership.

Based on my taxonomic analysis of the primary “superhero” players, “being a
leader” was a primary reason to play superheroes for all of the children. In their play, the
leader of the superheroes instructs the rest of the team what to do. As a result, the child in
this role is able to lead the play and have power and control over how the scenario plays
out. In most superhero scenarios, if he is attending school, Ron is the leader of the
scenario, such as Superman or Batman. Typically, Donovan will then take a supportive
role, such as Green Lantern. Alan usually states, “I want to be the leader,” but doesn’t have as much popular culture knowledge to know which character might correspond to the leader role. Brian also usually wants to be the leader, but often will take on the role of “bad guy.” I think this actually provides him with the opportunity to have the control and power of the leader role as he can direct what the “good guys” do in response to what he does as a “bad guy.”

For Donovan, he only took on the roles of leaders when playing Star Wars. Donovan has a lot of popular culture knowledge about many superheroes. He was able to take the lead with Star Wars as most of the other children did not have this knowledge. He brought this interest to school after he had been playing the Star Wars Lego Video game with his father. Also, while playing superheroes, he usually plays with Ron. They have both described each other as “best friends.” Ron is older and also has a lot of knowledge about superheroes. In this relationship, Donovan typically takes on the superhero roles of more supportive characters.

However, when Donovan took on the leadership roles of the Star Wars characters there were some other factors that may have contributed to his ability to move into a leadership role. Much of this play happened during the summer, and Ron took several vacations and often came to school later in the day based on his parents’ work schedules. Donovan also was one of the few students who had access to information about the Star Wars characters based on his experiences with his father and the Lego video game and other information he received from his father. With other superheroes, children tended to
look to Ron first for information, however, with Star Wars, Donovan became the child
the other children would go to for information.

Most of the children, did not want to play the “bad guy.” The following is an
example of how the children were attempting to negotiate the role of the bad guy. In this
example, none of the children would agree to play the character of the “bad guy.” The
decision was never made and the play never progressed from this point.

Anthony: “Are you the bad guy?” (to Alan)
Alan: “No.”
Anthony: “Are you the bad guy Ron?”
Ron: “No.”
Anthony: “Are you the bad guy Alan?”
Alan: “No.”
Anthony: “Are you the bad guy Ron?”
Ron: “No. I said I’m not the bad guy.”
Anthony: “Then you must be the bad guy Alan.”
Alan: “No. I’m not the bad guy.”
[Field Notes, January 11, 2005]

During my observations, Brian and Eric were the only children who would play the “bad
guy” on a regular basis. Towards the end of my observations, Brian stopped taking on the
role of “bad guy.” Through my observations and analysis, however, it seems that Brian
would sometimes take on the “bad guy” role to have a different way to be a leader. In
their play, the “bad guy” often controlled or led the play by being the one that creates the
“danger.” I believe through my observations that this is part of the reason Brian may have
often selected the “bad guy” role. I asked him about it in a video revisiting session, but he
did not provide a response. Table 4.3 breaks down the characters different children
played corresponding to the given superhero scenario. The characters in “bold” are
typically considered to be the leaders of the superhero group.

173
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Justice League</th>
<th>Power Rangers</th>
<th>Shark Boy/Lava Girl</th>
<th>Star Wars</th>
<th>Teen Titans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ron</strong> (male)</td>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>Doesn’t play too much</td>
<td><strong>Shark Boy</strong></td>
<td>Did not observe him play</td>
<td>Played when he was not there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martian Manhunter</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Donovan</strong> (male)</td>
<td>Green Lantern Flash</td>
<td>Doesn’t play too much</td>
<td>Brain Man Max</td>
<td>Obi Wan Kenobi Anakin Skywalker</td>
<td>Robin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alan</strong> (male)</td>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>Green Ranger (said he saw that he was the leader on TV)</td>
<td><strong>Shark Boy</strong></td>
<td>Yoda</td>
<td>Cyborg</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martian Manhunter</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Brian</strong> (male)</td>
<td><strong>Bad Guy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Red Ranger</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bad Guy</strong></td>
<td>Luke Skywalker</td>
<td>Did not observe him play</td>
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<td>Wonder Woman (1X)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jeannie</strong> (female)</td>
<td>Batwoman</td>
<td>Pink Ranger Yellow Ranger</td>
<td>Lava Girl <strong>Shark Boy</strong> (2x)</td>
<td>Princess Leia Princess Amidala Queen Amidala Chewbacca</td>
<td>Beast Boy Star Fire Raven Cyborg</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wonder Woman Hawk Girl</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Olivia</strong> (female)</td>
<td>Wonder Woman Hawkgirl</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Lava Girl</td>
<td>Princess Amidala Queen Amidala</td>
<td>Raven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lien</strong> (female)</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Lava Girl</td>
<td>Princess Amidala Queen Amidala</td>
<td>Star Fire</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wonder Woman Hawk Girl</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ashanta</strong> (female)</td>
<td>Batwoman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Lava Girl</td>
<td>Amidala</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wonder Woman Hawk Girl</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nick</strong></td>
<td><strong>Batman</strong></td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Max</td>
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<td>Ranger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Red Ranger</td>
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<td>(male)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>Black Ranger</td>
<td>Shark Boy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(male)</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>(often is a</td>
<td>Lava Girl</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power Ranger</td>
<td>Power Ranger</td>
<td>Bad Guy or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(often is a</td>
<td>Power Ranger)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Power Ranger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Hawk Girl</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: Roles in Superhero Play

As table 4.3 illustrates, the children with greater knowledge of the superhero narrative and programs were able to access the leadership roles. However, there are interesting complexities within these role selections by individuals, as well as positioning by others in the selection and assignment of roles. I will examine these complexities through a multiple perspective analysis of leadership in children’s superhero play.

Using a peer culture lens, the examination of leadership is very similar to the previous analysis of knowledge (Corsaro, 1985; Kantor & Fernie, 2003). With this perspective, the children with knowledge were able to access the leadership roles more often than the children with less knowledge. Here we can also examine how “being a leader” was something that was valued and became part of the peer culture’s language and discourse.

Alternatively, applying a feminist poststructural perspective, we can examine the issue of gender in role selection and access to leadership roles (Davies, 2003; Walkerdine, 1985). In the chart, none of the children who are female ever had a
leadership role in superhero play. I had one leadership role, Shark Boy, and only had that role two times in the entire time of my study. Using this perspective, I can argue that the female children are being positioned in subservient roles when playing superhero play and male children are able to be positioned in positions of leadership and therefore power. Perhaps, the female children would be more interested in this type of play if they were able to access roles that were more powerful. Additionally, the children may be reproducing societal patterns of gender through positioning males as leaders as females as supporters.

Complimenting this perspective, I can examine leadership through a Foucauldian lens (1980). These leadership roles are patterned after the discourse of the superhero narrative and shows that reflect the strongest and most powerful male characters as the leaders and the female characters and less powerful males as the assistants. However, Brian challenges this discourse through positioning himself in an unidentified leadership role as the “bad guy” as he used that role to control and direct the play.

Being a leader was a common theme that arose in children’s play and in their discussions in interviews and video revisiting sessions. As described here, being a leader was a complex issue in the peer culture that involved negotiations and positionings by others and by the children themselves, such as Brian positioning themselves as a “bad guy.” The leadership roles aligned with the superhero characters in the shows described above were all male. The primary children in the peer culture are also male and selected these roles. Gender was another primary aspect of becoming a member in the peer culture group.
Gender

While there are four primary boys interested in superheroes (Ron, Donovan, Alan, and Brian), superhero play can also be considered a phenomenon of the classroom as a whole. All of the children have engaged in superhero play in some form. There are several girls who also often played superheroes, particularly Olivia and Lien. Table 4.3 also illustrates how the children position themselves by gender roles of the characters they choose. For example, other than one instance where Brian played Wonder Woman, the children almost always select or are positioned by others into roles that are aligned with their respective gender. I was one of the people who played male roles, such as Shark Boy, or more androgynous roles, such as Chewbacca or other characters that were not as clearly defined as male or female. However, even taking on these more androgynous roles was resisted at times.

Donovan had a sheet of paper at the climber.
He said to me, “Sorry no girls,” while pointing to the sheet.
He paused for a moment and said, “You can be Amidala.”
He then said, “Here – let me see the sheet again.”
I said, “I’ll be Chewbacca.”
Donovan replied, “First, no.”
I said, “Why not?”
He said, “Because you’re a girl.”
He paused and said, “Okay, touch your belly button and then you can change.”
I touched my belly button.
Donovan replied, “Okay, you’re Chewbacca.”
[Field notes – July 6, 2005]

In the classroom, I positioned myself as someone who would be assigned a role by the other children. Many of the other children did this as well, so in part I was following the cultural practice of the group. For example, many children approach the
leader, typically Ron, and state, “Who can I be?” He then assigns roles which are either taken up or challenged by the particular person. At times, however, I chose to challenge the roles that I was positioned in. In these situations, I wanted to challenge the gender role positioning and acceptance that was being taken up by the various participants. The following transcript illustrates one of these examples.

Eric was pushing into Ron.
Ron said, "Hey stop that. You can't do that."
Ron then said to Donovan, "Hey Donovan, let's tell him. Remember…Okay. No hitting, no kicking, no biting and no spitting."
Ron then said to Eric, "Hey do you want to play Shark boy and Lava girl. Eric shook his head up and down.
Ron asked, "Who do you want to be?"
Eric said, "Lava Girl."
Ron said, "You can't."
I said, "He could be Lava Girl if he wants to be."
Ron said, "But that's a girl."
I said, "Well, he could be her if he wants to be."
Eric maintained, "Lava Girl."
[Field Notes, May 25, 2005]

Here, Ron told Eric that he couldn’t be Lava Girl because she was a girl and he was a boy. I stated twice that he could play Lava Girl if he wanted to. I didn’t do this on all occasions, but I decided to do it here because Eric was new in the classroom and he was often rejected by the group. I wanted to help support his entry into the group and I also wanted to provide a different type of positioning by resisting the fixed gender roles by assigning boy characters to boys and girl characters to girls. Eric was interested in playing a variety of different characters, both boys and girls, and I wanted to support this. I felt that as a member of the peer culture group, I had the opportunity to share and express my own feelings and provide a different way of positioning by gender.
The girls, however, face the challenge of having a limited amount of female roles to emulate. The girls, in general, had less knowledge of the superheroes based on conversations and interviews, however, some of the girls, such as Lien and Olivia have a fairly strong knowledge. However, this challenge, led to the girls being able to express their strengths in creativity and problem solving. The girls have created their own roles, such as “Super Girl” and “Hawk Woman” in response to there only being two girls in “Justice League.”

Appropriation of superhero narrative

There also was one day when several girls came to join in a game of Justice League. In the Justice League, there are several male characters (i.e. Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Flash Gordon, Martian Manhunter) and only two female characters (i.e. Wonder Woman and Hawkgirl). On this day, there were already two girls playing Wonder Woman and Hawkgirl (I was one of them). I believe at least 3 or 4 other girls came over and wanted parts. Someone stated “We already have a Wonder Woman and a Hawkgirl.”

One of the girls said, “I’ll be Hawk Woman.” Then someone else followed, “I’ll be Bat Woman, I’ll be Bat Girl, I’ll be Super Woman, etc…” They seemed to be using the notion that you can have a beginning part (Bat, Super, Hawk) and then can add on “Woman” or “Girl”

Although there are some of these characters for real in other superhero cartoons (e.g. Bat Woman, Super Girl), it did not seem that the girls were aware of this. The girls were creating their own characters based on their knowledge of the character name formation. [Conceptual Memo – May 29, 2005]

Here, the initial girls that joined the group selected the only female roles available based on the Justice League characters. The other girls that joined could have given up and gone on to play somewhere else. The girls, however, are showing how they can creatively construct roles beyond the narratives provided to them by the media. The girls are also positioning themselves in a gender positioning against the stereotypes of society.
(i.e. superhero play is for boys) (Davies, 2003). This resistance to the prescribed narrative can be seen as the girls’ agency as they overcome the constraints of the societal discourse around superheroes (Foucault, 1980) as they develop their own voice and identity (Bakhtin, 1981) through the creation of their own superhero characters. They are also showing how they appropriated the construction of the superhero roles, through adding “girl” or “woman” to a given beginning.

After this particular scenario, the girls often continued to develop these “new roles.” After this, the girls continued to use this strategy and the girls and other boys also started to create and develop “new roles” to support the negotiation of roles. This next scenario presents an example of how the boys, in this case Donovan, also took up the “double roles,” which had originated with the girls.

“Welcome to Our Team, Shark Boy”
[This scenario will be used in several subsequent sections.]

Donovan, Alan, and I (Jeannie) are playing Shark Boy and Lava Girl on the climber in the block area. Sophia walks up and sits near us on the climber. She is observing but not participating. Lien announces to Ashanta, “They’re playing Lava Girl and Shark Boy.” Olivia comes over, “Can I be Lava Girl?” Ashanta asks, “Can I be Lava Girl?” Donovan shouts, “NOO! [with arms raised] Jeannie’s already Lava Girl!” Olivia responds, “But I wanna be Lava Girl too.” Donovan, “There can only be two Lava Girls.” Ashanta, “I wanna be Lava Girl.” Donovan responds, “There can’t be three there can only be two” [holds up two fingers]. Ashanta again states, “I wanna be Lava Girl too.” Donovan insists, “There can only be two. Ok?” Adrianna comes over. The other children are continuing to discuss who can and cannot be Lava Girl. They bring up the possibility of someone being Ice Girl, however, someone mentions that she is a “bad guy” and no one wants to be her. Alan suggests, “You can be the good Ice Girl.” There are now five girls, two boys, and myself on the climber continuing to negotiate the roles. [Summary of Video Clip, June 29, 2005]
The new possibility of the “double roles” created a new opportunity for inclusion in the superhero play. However, it also created another opportunity for exclusion where Donovan was able to decide how many could be involved in the play, and therefore, how many would be too many. Alan demonstrated his creativity by stating that Ice Girl could be the “Good Ice Girl.” Thus the appropriation of roles originated with a limited number of female roles and it spread to become a creative appropriation by the peer culture to allow more participation and membership by the creation of new roles.

Becoming a member of the peer culture group was at times very complex. Sometimes it took more than an hour for children to discuss and negotiate membership. These negotiations are rich sources of opportunity for the children to problem solve, position themselves socially, learn about social roles and positions, take on leadership roles, create alternative leadership roles, such as “the bad guy,” and both subscribe to and resist traditional gender roles. The roles in children’s play are not static and are dependent on the specific play scenario, different players, and positioning that is both used and either subscribed to or resisted by the other players. The girls in this group were able to be more flexible with the roles as they may have less knowledge or investment in connections to the superhero narratives prescribed by the popular culture.

The peer culture group shared a common interest in superheroes and becoming a member was a complex process involving access to knowledge, leadership, and gender identity. The peer culture group also had many artifacts associated with superheroes that were also used to show membership and affiliation as a peer culture group.
Children’s interest in superheroes extends beyond their play centered on superheroes. In this peer culture group, the children had and used many artifacts related to superheroes. Every day I attended the classroom one or more of these forms of display have been visible, typically more as many of the “other artifacts,” such as lunchboxes, are visible on a daily basis. These artifacts were found in the following categories: Clothing, Superhero Action Figures, Media Products, Lunchboxes, Food, and Superhero Toys from Fast Food Restaurants. These categories alone display the children’s strong interest in superheroes. Additionally, the various artifacts display the many different ways this interest can and is being demonstrated in this particular classroom. All of these items are not surprising in and of them themselves, particularly given the numerous forms or marketing readily available for children’s consumption. However, what is interesting is the prevalence of these various forms of interest in superheroes from the children’s peer culture perspective.

For example, in terms of clothing, many of the children wore clothes associated with superheroes. For example, Brian often wore T-shirts with superhero characters such as the Power Rangers. Anthony often wore socks with Spiderman characters on them. Ron frequently wore Batman pajamas to school and occasionally came in wearing a Batman costume. Brian also wore a Power Rangers costume to school on one occasion. Superhero action figures describes the kinds of action figures the children brought in from home to school. Media Products describes items such as DVD movies or television shows, magazines, books, or CDs of music related to superheroes. Because the children
brought their lunch to school, some children, such as Donovan and Ron, had lunchboxes with superheroes on them. In the children’s lunches, the children sometimes had food connected to superheroes, such as potato chips with superhero characters printed on them or fruit gummies in the shape of superheroes. Finally, some children brought in toys from home that they received after purchasing a kids meal in a fast food restaurant. The artifacts are categorized in the following taxonomic list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Superhero Artifacts from the Children’s Peer Culture</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clothing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• T-shirts (short sleeve and long sleeve)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Socks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sneakers/Tennis Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sandals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Underwear (sometimes worn alone without pants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pajamas (worn to and during school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Costumes (worn or brought from home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Costumes (worn from the school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superhero Action Figures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power Rangers (mostly from Power Rangers Dino Thunder, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and Power Rangers SPD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Justice League/Super Friends characters (e.g. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash Gordon, and Green Lantern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incredibles characters (e.g. Mr. Incredible, ElastiGirl, Violet, Dash)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rescue Heroes (considered by the children as superheroes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Silver Surfer (introduced in the Fantastic Four)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Superhero Action Figure Accessories (e.g. Power Ranger motorcycle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media Products</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- DVD’s of Superhero movies or cartoons
- Incredibles DVD insert (paper included inside the DVD)
- Magazines (looking at advertisements for Superhero materials or shows)
- Books about superheroes (brought from home)
- Books about superheroes (at the school)
- CD’s from Superhero movies
- Comic Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lunchboxes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Spiderman Lunchbox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Batman Lunchbox</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Fruit gummies (Justice League)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fruit gummies (Star Wars)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pringles potato chips (Incredibles)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superhero Toys from Fast Food Restaurants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Star Wars toys from Burger King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incredibles toys from McDonalds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4: Superhero Artifacts

One artifact, action figures, was often used in conjunction with superhero play as a supporting prop. This photograph shows the peer culture group using action figures in a block structure they created.
The children have brought in many action figures, primarily Power Rangers and characters from the Justice League. However, this interest has also shown a change in pattern over time. When the Incredibles DVD was released there was a large surge in interest around this movie and the action figures. This interest faded, while the children’s interest in Power Rangers continued. In late spring/early summer, children’s interest shifted toward the Justice League/Super Friends characters. In the summer, the children’s interest again shifted to Shark Boy and Lava Girl, and especially Star Wars. The interest in Star Wars and Justice League continued throughout the time I was there in November.

The changes in children’s interest seemed to be very connected to outside influences, such as the release of movies, DVD movies, video games, or items being marketed in fast food restaurants, which typically coincided with the release of a movie.
During these waves of interests of the peer culture connected to movies and fast food meal toys, some of the children watched the movies or got the toys at the restaurants, but not all of the children did. Based on this analysis, it is also evident that not all releases and marketing had as much influence on the children. The release of the Incredibles DVD generated the most interest. The Incredibles was a movie that attracted the interest of both the male and female children. I believe was attractive to both boys and girls in the class due to the movie being about a “family” of superheroes. In my observations of the class, “family” is a common theme of interest and is often included in children’s play centered on superheroes as well.

The Incredibles is a movie based on a family of superheroes. The summary of the movie is, “A family of undercover superheroes, while trying to live the quiet suburban life, are forced into action to save the world” (Internet Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0317705/). The family includes the father, Bob Parr, (a.k.a. Mr. Incredible), the mother, Helen Parr (a.k.a. ElastiGirl), an older brother, Dashiell “Dash” Parr, a sister, Violet Parr, and a baby boy Jack Jack Parr. In the classroom, the children often took on various roles of the Incredibles aligned with their gender.

Throughout the year, the children continued to play Justice League and Power Rangers. These shows are frequently on television and are also available as DVD’s or VHS tapes that are available to purchase or borrow from local libraries. Thus, these characters and shows are more readily available in the children’s popular culture and may therefore relate to the continuing and prolonged interest in these particular shows. The
following table details these releases and associated data connected to examples of children’s superhero interests at this time.

<p>| Popular Culture (*references in this section from Internet Movie Database and McDonald’s and Burger King press releases. See reference section) | Peer Culture Interest (Superheroes) |
|---|---|---|
| Event | Date | Interest Examples | Source/Date(s) |
| Incredibles DVD released | March 15, 2005 | Brian shows other children the paper insert that goes with the Incredibles DVD Ron and Brian play Incredibles after rest Ron, Alan, Lien, and Olivia play Incredibles Donovan, Alan, and Ron are playing Incredibles. Ron is | Field Notes (March 16, 2005) Field Notes (March 16, 2005) Field Notes (March 22, 2005) Field Notes (March 24, 2005) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lego Star Wars: The Video Game released</td>
<td>April 2, 2005</td>
<td>Donovan, Brian, and I playing Lego Transformers Justice League</td>
<td>Field Notes (April 18 &amp; 22, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D movie release</td>
<td>June 10, 2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shark Boy and Lava Girl toys in McDonald's Happy Meals</td>
<td>June 10 – July 7, 2005</td>
<td>Playing superheroes (jumping in water, shooting fire)</td>
<td>Teacher Research Notes (June 27, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batman Begins movie released</td>
<td>June 15, 2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantastic Four movie released</td>
<td>July 8, 2005</td>
<td>Playing Spiderman/Star Wars with “goop” Playing “fish” are superheroes in sensory</td>
<td>Teacher Research Notes (July 7, 2005) Teacher Research Notes (July 12, 2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“quoting” the movie lines directly and incorporating into his play.

Teachers note in curriculum guide that children are interested in playing Incredibles and bringing in small action figures

Adrianna gives Donovan a sheet of Incredibles stickers during lunch

Curriculum Guide (Week of March 28- April 5, 2005)

Field Notes (April 18, 2005)
Table 4.5: Relationship between popular culture and children’s interests in superheroes

The artifacts in the children’s peer culture reflected the children’s strong interest in superheroes that went beyond just their interest in superhero play. These artifacts were important to the peer culture group and were used to express their interest and demonstrate membership in the group. The artifacts were also linked to the broader context of popular culture including movie releases and product promotion from fast food restaurants.

Much of the children’s play also aligns with the superhero narratives presented in these movies and television shows, as I noticed through viewing many of the current movies and television series. The superhero narrative includes at least one “good guy” and one “bad guy”, a dangerous situation caused by the “bad guy” that the “good guy” needs to resolve, a predicament that puts the “good guy” in danger, and a culmination where the “good guy” “saves the day.” This narrative aligns with Garvey’s (1990) description of pretend play “averting threat” (p. 93). In the children’s routine of playing superheroes, their representation of superheroes aligns with this narrative.

Superhero Play Narrative

When children are playing superheroes they are engaging in a storytelling event. They are engaging in what Bauman (1986) would call narrative as performance (as cited in Bloome, Champion, Katz, Morton & Mudlow, 2000). The narrative is being created
within the social situation that the superhero play is occurring in and it is also influenced by past interactions with the social group and from the aspects of superheroes from the media and popular culture. Thus, it is a social and cultural phenomenon that must be analyzed in the given context. The “language practices are social and cultural practices that are enacted and transformed by people interacting in specific events” (Bloome et al., 2001, p. 51). Garvey (1990) describes pretend play as “largely a matter of communication” and how important this communication comes through as children communicate through the role they are taking on (p. 86). With different actors and different narratives the stories are always being co-constructed and they are always changing and are fluid, however there are also always constraints (Foucault, 1980). The constraints come from the superhero narrative in the popular culture, such as there are set pool of characters to choose from. These constraints occur as the child needs to conform to aspects of the particular character to signify their identity. For example, in this group if playing Green Lantern the child needs to use a ring or pretend ring as their weapon to shoot. But constraints also provide opportunities (Foucault, 1980). The play provides opportunities for the child to take on roles that they cannot do in real life, such as being a superhero, but the play also provides constraints as they have to maintain the actions of the character they are portraying (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, the children are constructing and creating their own interpretations and stories through their peer culture group and negotiations. These constructions are dynamic and vary dependent on the individual and group interpretations of the narrative. Thus, the narrative performance is not static, fixed, or merely a copy or reenactment of a superhero show.
Thus, the negotiations and roles are very complex and fluid. In this group, the children’s superhero narratives usually followed a general pattern aligned with narrative based on Labov (1972), consisting of the orientation (setting and characters), a complicating action leading to the climax, and a resolution, which are also similar to Garvey’s (1990) descriptions the pretend play category “averting threat.”

1. Orientation (setting and characters)
   - Determining what superhero theme to play (e.g. Power Rangers, Justice League)
   - Determining where to play
   - Negotiation of roles (Becoming a member of the peer culture)

2. The Climax
   - Involves some type of danger (a complicating action)
   - At least one character is chased, trapped, or killed by the “bad guy”.

3. The Resolution
   - Involves some type of rescue
   - The “good guys” will follow by chasing the “bad guy”, untrapping the trapped character, or bring the “dead” character back to life.

4. Repeat
   - Steps 1, 2 and 3 may repeat multiple times.
   - Occasionally the children may select a different role or another child(ren) enter the play and the negotiation of roles needs to occur within the play scenario

Steps 1-3 of the superhero narratives are described below with supporting examples from the children’s play.

*Orientation (Setting and characters)*

In the children’s play, the orientation often occurs as the children are negotiating membership in the peer culture group. The setting typically is determined by the superhero narrative, such as a ship in outer space if playing Star Wars. The setting, however, was also fluid and changing depending on other features of the play. An
example would be if Darth Vader invaded the ship, the people in the ship may evacuate and hide in the cubbies. The determination of characters is a primary aspect of becoming a member of the group and is often complex and involves issues of knowledge, leadership, and gender. Like the setting, the negotiation of roles is also fluid and dependent on the children already involved and new children joining the play. Thus, the negotiation of roles is not a fixed time period in the superhero narrative, but often an ongoing feature of the narrative formation.

The following scenario illustrates the complicated process of role negotiation.

Justice League (Negotiating play with the blue sock game)

Nick and I were at the climber. He told me that he was Batman and that I could be Super Girl. Anthony came over and said, “I want to be Green Lantern.” Nick said, “Okay.” Olivia came over. Anthony said to Olivia, “Jeannie’s Hawkgirl.” Olivia said, “I want to be Wonder Woman. Can I play?” Anthony, “You have to ask Nick because it’s his game.” Nick, “You have to ask Brian because it’s his game.” Anthony, “Whose game is it?” Nick, “I know! Come to the climber and do blue shoe. Put your feet out. Blue shoe, blue shoe, I pick YOU! Put your foot away” (pushed foot). [we were supposed to move our foot away at this point.] Me: “How do we know if we’re playing?” Nick: “If both of your foots are away then you get to play.” He proceeded to do this several times, first he put his foot away, then mine, then Olivia’s, then Anthony’s, and then his again. Nick: "I'm in the game.” He then went to Olivia’s foot and stopped. Olivia said, "I'm in the game game!” Then Nick laughed, "Oh.” Then he pushed both Anthony’ and my feet away at the same time and said, "You're in the game. You're in the game.” I said, "So we're all in the game?” Nick said, "Yes."
After this the “game” never really went anywhere. Olivia went to the mat and Lien joined her and did some karate type moves on the front mat. Meanwhile Nick and Anthony were on the climber and then Olivia, Lien, and Eric tried to join them. It became very crowded and shortly thereafter the children all went to different areas of the room. [Field Notes – May 25, 2005]

In this scenario, Nick created his own game on the spot that created a way to select who was or wasn’t going to play. Based on my previous observations, the children sometimes try to exclude Olivia from play. In this situation, I believe Nick was trying to fix the game to exclude Olivia. When he finished the second round, he ended up stopping on Olivia and then he stopped and didn’t say anything. He seemed surprised and Olivia seemed to be aware of what was happening based on her response, “I’m in the game, game!”

After the setting and characters are determined, the scenario begins, usually with some type of complicating action or a dangerous situation. This usually occurs based on whoever is the “bad guy” or a description of what an imaginary “bad guy” has done.

The Climax

Superhero narratives, such as in cartoons, movies and comic books, follow a predictable narrative sequence. The climax typically involves some type of dangerous situation and is usually the most suspenseful and engaging part of the movie or text. In children’s superhero play, it is also sometimes the most suspenseful. Here the scenario, “Welcome to our Team, Shark Boy” continues:
As the children were negotiating roles, Brian arrives to school. He comes over the block area and gets on the climber. He growls. Alan pretends to grab at him. Brian goes after him. Brian growls and pretends to scratch at us on the climber. Donovan, “Hurry everyone get in the water. Actually, everybody hide in your cubbies.” Everyone follows and goes to their cubbies. He says, “That’s your ship. Hurry! Fly! Blast off!” Brian comes by and is pretending to shoot at people in their cubbies with his arm. Donovan is shooting at Brian from his cubby.

Lien comes by the cubbies. I tell her, “We’re all hiding in our cubbies Lien.” Lien, “Yeah because the monster’s on the loose.” Now, it is quiet. Brian has left the area. I ask, “Do you think he’s coming back?” Suddenly Brian comes around the corner and yells, “RAWR!” and continues to pretend to shoot and attack the people in their cubbies. The other children shoot back at him. He continues to leave and come back. Samantha and her dad arrive at school. Samantha’s dad tells Samantha to put her stuff in her cubby. Lien tells Samantha, “We’re hiding in our cubbies from the monster.”

After a little while, everyone that is present at school join together in a group by the cubbies and start chanting, “Nah, nah, nah, na, boo, boo” over and over to Brian who is continuing to pretending to be the “monster” and trying to attack. After he comes over again, Donovan shouts, “Everybody hide in your cubbies! Hide in your cubbies superheroes!”

Brian is now in the climber. A group of five children come out of the cubbies and start shooting at him. They are all shooting and swinging their arms toward Brian as they pretend to fight him. Six children eventually corner him in an area of the cubbies. Olivia grabs onto his shirt and says, “Don’t do it again. For once and all.”

This scenario is representative of how the children acted up the climax. Leading up to the climax scenario there is a “bad guy” (as described by the children). One of the children will sometimes be the “bad guy,” often Brian, but sometimes no one wants to take on this role. In these situations, the children often conceived of an imaginative “bad guy.”

Another important characteristic of the climax in superhero play is the chase and flee. Typically it is the “bad guy” who chases the good guys. In this situation, the children sometimes hide. In many of these situations one or all of the children will hide in
some aspect of the classroom. Often times it is the climber, a block structure the children have created, under the tables, or in this case in their cubbies. There are differences in the situations when the children play superheroes indoors versus outdoors. When the children are outdoors, this aspect of the scenarios, especially the chasing and fleeing is usually more extensive. This is perhaps due to a larger area for the children to run where inside running is limited to around the circle area of the classroom.

Other situations that might be part of the climax of the superhero play that were frequently observed, but not in this particular scenario, are capturing or trapping, poisoning, and/or killing one of the characters. Early on in my participation, I was frequently the victim of many of these dangerous situations. Later on as I became more of a member of the group, some of the children, particularly Donovan, became protective of me of a member of the group and often resisted attempts by others to try to maim or kill me.

The Resolution

The Resolution of the superhero play scenario involves an attempt to save or reconcile the dangerous situation in some fashion. In the “Welcome to Our Team Shark Boy” this is how the scenario culminated:
After Olivia grabbed Brian’s shirt and told him, “Don’t do it again. For once and all,” the teacher Andrea states, “You’re really touching him. You need to be careful with his body.” Olivia looks at her and shakes her head up and down in agreement. While this is happening, Brian tells Donovan and Alan that he’s not the monster anymore. Olivia and some of the other girls are continuing to shoot at Brian.

Donovan stands in front of Brian with arms spread out and says, “He’s on our team.”

Olivia pauses and then approaches Brian. She shakes his hand and says, “Welcome to our team Shark Boy.” [Video Clip, June 29, 2005]

In this situation, the resolution did not involve saving someone or bringing them back to life, rather, a decision by one child to no longer be the bad guy led to a change in role and positioning in the scenario. Although it is not visible in this description, at this time because there were so many children involved the play was beginning to escalate by becoming loud and it led to the teacher coming over to provide support. Based on my observations of this situation and of other observations of Brian, I believe that he did not want the play to escalate and he figured out a way to take control of the situation. This is something that he has learned over time as early on the teachers would frequently talk to him about being too loud or getting too physical with the other children.

The children also demonstrated their own agency in terms of their ability to control the given situation. In this situation, Donovan is leading the group. They are playing Star Wars. They were just in a ship (constructed out of the wooden blocks) and now they are on the mats next to the climber.
Donovan states, “Pretend we died.”
Lien, Nala, Ashanta, and Donovan all lie down.
Adrianna remains standing.
Kelly (teacher assistant) says to group, “Are you all dead?”
Adrianna says, “Oh, no.”
Kelly, “Adrianna, we better call their moms and dads.”
Donovan stands up and says, “No, we don’t need moms and dads, we’re Star Wars. We can take care of our own selves.”
Kelly, “Ok then.”
Donovan then says, “Oh, oh, Ahhh” and falls back down on the mat.
[Field Notes, July 28, 2005]

Thus, the teacher here was trying to help the children proceed to the resolution stage of the play by encouraging Adrianna to call their moms and dads. However, Donovan, resisted this positioning as someone who needed to be saved and rescued. Through stating, “No, we don’t need moms and dads, we’re Star Wars. We can take care of our own selves,” he contends that he is strong, powerful, and independent.

In his study of peer culture in a preschool Corsaro (1985) also found many themes of children’s constructed peer cultures including (1) Bad Guys/Good Guys (Good vs. Evil), (2) Chasing/Hiding, (3) Trapping/Rescuing, and (4) Life and Death. These general themes also crossed over to other peer culture groups that were interested in play that also explored many aspects of these themes, including groups that were interested in doggies and kitties, and playing Simbas and Nalas (The Lion King). From the peer culture perspective, the children’s narrative performance may reflect children’s interest in these themes and the children are constructing their knowledge and understanding of these issues together in their peer culture groups.
A Foucauldian perspective affords the opportunity to examine the reproduction of the superhero discourse through children’s play (1980). In the play, the children are following a similar narrative to the superhero narrative. However, because they are individuals interacting and negotiating in a group, this narrative becomes very fluid and complex. For example, Brian was able to change from one team to another team just through stating that he doesn’t want to be the monster anymore. This is a possibility that is not afforded in a typical narrative, but through the children’s play they are able to construct and create this possibility. Thus, they are not limited and completely constrained by the superhero narrative.

Through the children’s construction of the narrative, it is also useful to apply the concept of positioning (Davies, 2003; Walkerdine, 1985). Throughout the narrative, from the orientation, to the climax, to the resolution, the children are continuously positioning themselves and others. In the orientation, Nick attempted to position and exclude Olivia from the play through the blue sock game and Olivia was able to successfully position herself and gain entry to the game by stating, “I’m in the game game.” Brian was able to position himself and direct the play through taking on the role of a “bad guy” during the climax and then reposition himself as a member of the Shark Boy team. In the resolution section, Donovan positions himself as independent and autonomous as he claims that “We can take care of our own selves.”

Examining the narrative construction of superhero play through multiple perspectives, illustrates the complexity of the children’s play. It is not a simple reconstruction or reproduction of the superhero narrative prescribed by the media. The
children’s narrative production involves in the complex negotiation of roles, working through thematic issues such as good vs. evil and life and death, and issues of autonomy, leadership, and inclusion exclusion. Applying multiple perspectives, we are able to understand children’s superhero narrative in a more complex and deeper way.

**Children Relate Superhero Play to School Culture Practices**

What are the children’s perspectives on superhero play? In order to understand the children’s perspectives, I studied the children in their own context, to understand their routines and practices, and their language (Gaskins et al., 1992). Through understanding the children’s perspectives I am able to gain greater understanding of the children’s peer culture practices through an inside perspective (Fernie et al., 1995). Analyzing children’s perspectives about superhero play through their peer culture reveals aspects of their culture that are both explicit and implicit. The explicit aspects of their culture are those that are most known to the participants and can be revealed through their direct language and descriptions. The implicit aspects of their culture can become more explicit through analysis and interpretation. In comparison to the teachers’ perspectives, it is more difficult to understand the children’s perspectives on superhero play, particularly the implicit aspects. My analysis and interpretations are framed through the use of multiple data sources including observations, conversations, interviews with small groups and individuals, and video revisiting sessions. The interviews and video revisiting sessions provided me with opportunities to talk with the children for longer periods of time with a more focused topic. Initially, I frame an analysis of the children’s perspective through examining children’s conceptions and reactions to adult rules including making plans,
being visible to adults, the use of saved signs, and home toys (Corsaro, 1985). Following I analyze children’s perspectives about affiliation, inclusion, power, leadership, value of artifacts, and the expression of care.

Children’s Conceptions and Reactions to Adult Rules

Children’s peer cultures are created in context with the school culture. Corsaro (1985) building from Goffman’s (1961) concept of secondary adjustments, argues that peer cultures often resist adult rules. I observed these reactions to the adults’ rules in relation to making plans, hiding, saved signs, and home toys.

“Making Plans” from a Peer Culture Perspective

As described in the school culture, the children in the school were allowed to bring in toys and items from home, as long as they fit in their cubby. These items were referred to as “home toys”. Many of the children in the class would bring in home toys, some would bring in select special items, and some would never bring in any items. When children have “home toys” they often have to “make plans” for the items. As the “home toys” are often novel or items that are not usually available in the school, such as action figures, Barbies dolls, etc…, the items are highly coveted. At times many children want to make a plan for the item and the teachers help the children come up with a list. Sometimes the children who brought the toy from home, only want to share the item(s) with their close friends or members of their peer culture group. As a result, the children sometimes go “underground” and develop their own ways to make plans. These are some examples of how children have made adjustments to “making plans.”
• The child(ren) use the item near the cubby and put it away quickly if anyone comes by.
• Only making plans with certain peers and saying others can’t use it for a certain reason
• Using the item in a discreet way, such as huddled over in a group.
• Having someone looking out and then put the item away quickly, usually in the cubby, if someone else comes by

Photograph 4.4 illustrates several of the children making plans with their home toys by the cubbies.

![Photograph 4.4: Making plans with home toys](image)
The children who are younger or new to the classroom often have more difficulty “making plans” and an adult will usually help facilitate the transaction. The older children (i.e. the ones who have been at the school longer) have developed an understanding of how “making plans” works. At times, this knowledge allows the child to take advantage of another child.

The children also used humor and created their own way of making plans. For example in this excerpt from my field notes, the children use the concept to “making plans” to pretend to borrow parts of my face and body.

“I want to make a plan with your eyeballs”

I think Samantha started it. The children began saying, “I want to make plan with your eyes, your nose, your eyeballs, your face, your whole body.” They were mainly doing it to me, but to each other also. Samantha said at one point, “Five minutes is up.” Donovan said, “Yeah five minutes is up.” I pretended to give him my nose. He laughed. This continued for awhile.

[Field notes excerpt, April 14, 2005]

Here, the children show an understanding of how making plans work, you ask to make a plan with something and then after a certain amount of time you have to give it back or give it to the next person (“five minutes is up.”).

The peer culture created its own ways to “make plans” both in accordance with and by resisting the school culture’s conception of making plans, including the use of humor. The peer culture also did similar things in relationship to being visible to the teachers.
Hiding

According to Corsaro’s (1985) description of peer culture, the children often try to do things outside of the view of adults. In the classroom, the teachers expect the children to be visible to them at all times for their safety. However, the children often used several sites in the classroom as places to meet with peers outside of the purview of the teachers. These areas included the cubbies, the stairs, and sometimes the art area. Each of these areas is somewhat less visible depending on where a particular teacher is located. Some examples of places to hide in the classroom included: the doghouse, in the pretend kitchen cupboards, under the kitchen table in dramatic play (had a tablecloth), under the climber (with and without blankets), in the cubbies, in the loft in the quiet room, under the loft in the quiet room, on the back steps, and under the tables in the main area where they eat lunch and have activities. Outside, the children frequently hid in the climbing tubes in the climber, behind trees, in the gazebo, in the “infant climber” and behind or next to the shed. Often, these hiding places were visible to adults, such as under the climber or in the loft. However, certain areas were not visible to adults at all times, such as the stairs, or in the kitchen cupboards. The children used these hiding spaces in superhero play and other types of play.

“Saved Signs” from a Peer Culture Perspective

As described earlier in the section on school culture, the children are allowed to save their structure using a “Saved Sign,” which means the structure will stay together. The children in two of the peer culture groups, including the “superheroes,” began using the “Saved Signs” as a form of inclusion/exclusion.
The following photograph illustrates an example of a saved sign. In this case the four children put their photographs and initials to show that they could use the block structure.

Photograph 4.5: Saved sign

*Children’s perspectives on home toys.*

All of the primary children involved in the superhero peer culture group brought in toys from home. Ron, Brian, and Donovan regularly brought in home toys and Alan brought in a few items including a Star Wars light saber. In my observations, I noticed that the children, especially Donovan and Brian, would sometimes selectively choose to have their home toys out and sometimes put them away. From my point of view, this seemed to be a way to determine who the children wanted to share their toys with. The
Jeanne – So how come sometimes you decide to have your toys out and sometimes to put them away?
Donovan – um, maybe, um sometimes, uh [says something and moves away]
Donovan – uh, maybe sometimes, uh, they get it out for a little and then they feel like it’s too special
Jeanne – So, Donovan, you said sometimes you might take it out but then decide it’s too special and put it back away again?
Jeanne- Uh, huh [Alan is pushing his body into Donovan]
Jeanne – How do you decide if it’s too special?
Alan – Do nothing with it
Donovan – noggin
Jeanne – In your noggin you decide it’s too special?
Brian – No
Jeanne – So how do you?
Donovan – I watch Noggin and I have a noggin.
Jeanne – So right now Brian is going to answer.
Brian – I and I … stop [Alan is putting his foot on Brian’s foot]
Jeanne – let Brian answer and Donovan stay over here so I can still see you on the camera.
Brian – and, and, I put it away because it’s brand new and I didn’t want Eric or Jordan to have a turn
Jeanne – Why don’t you want Eric or Jordan to have a turn?
Brian – Because I don’t want them to have it.
Jeanne – Why don’t you want them to have it?
Brian – Because I want to have it by myself.
Jeanne – But you were sharing with some other people like Donovan, and Alan, and Ron. Why isn’t it ok for Eric and Jordan to play with it?
Jeanne – You know guys listen because you have something to say, I’ve been wondering about this [Alan is continuing to push into Donovan]
Brian – Because they’re not my friends.
Jeanne – Why aren’t they your friends?
Donovan – Um, I think that is a bad word.
Jeanne – You can say that. It’s not really a bad word; it’s just how he’s feeling.
Jeanne – So why are you feeling that they’re not your friends?
Alan – Well you can’t say that
Brian – because (inaudible)
Jeanne …. Well what do you think about that? ….How come?
Donovan – Because I decide that they’re too special
Jeanne – How do you decide it when Eric and Jordan are coming?
Donovan – Noggin
Jeanne – Why is it ok for some people to play, but not for Eric or Jordan?
Donovan – Because, um, because um I feel like it has, I feel like it has everyone’s name on it, but I didn’t write Eric and Jordan on my toys so before and that’s why I don’t want them to play with them
Jeanne – So it sounds like some of the newer people, like Eric and Jordan are kind of newer
Donovan – No, I was talking about the old people I put them on but not the new people.
Jeanne – So why just the old people, not the new people?
Donovan – Just because I decide on it. By the way Brian, cool Power Ranger shirt.
Brian – It’s SPD.
[Video Revisiting – October 5, 2005]

This transcript provides information on many of the peer culture’s ideas about home toys, friendships, and inclusion and exclusion. Eric and Jordan, at the time, had recently transitioned from the infant/toddler room to the preschool room and were considered “new.” The children who had already been in the preschool room were considered “old.” When I questioned the group about the practice of putting the home toys away when certain children approach, both Donovan and Brian responded. Brian stated that he put them away because he didn’t want them to play with his toys, “Because they’re not my friends.” Donovan seemed concerned about this and that he thought this statement was a “bad word.” He further commented that he does this because “I decide that they’re too special” and that his “noggin” tells him to put them away when Eric and Jordan approach. He later justifies this exclusionary practice by stating that the toys he brought only had the “old” people’s names on them, but not the “new” ones, which would include Eric and Jordan. Interestingly, at the end, Donovan seems to change the
subject by addressing the shirt Brian is wearing that happens to be a “cool Power Ranger shirt.” This signaled to me that they were done talking about this issue.

The peer culture practices related to making plans, saved signs, and home toys all relate to issues of inclusion and exclusion. The children make adjustments to these school culture practices to determine entry and access to the peer culture group. From a peer culture perspective, we can examine this issue through the children’s use of secondary adjustments and their conceptions and reactions to adult rules (Corsaro, 1985; Goffman, 1961). This perspective, overall is fairly compelling, but there are additional issues that could be examined from another perspective.

Using a feminist poststructural perspective, we can examine the use of positioning in terms of status and entry/access to the peer culture group (Davies, 2003; Walkerdine, 1985). In several of the examples above, the children are excluding the “new” children, Eric and Jordan. Through doing this, the older children, perhaps, are positioning themselves as having status and being the leader of the superhero group. Additionally, through negotiating the process of making plans, the older children are able to take advantage of the younger children in this practice because they have had more practice at the procedure and they have been able to figure out ways to get around the school culture practices.

From another perspective, we can further examine the dynamics between the peer culture and school culture practices through a Foucauldian lens (1980). We can use this perspective to look at how the children react to and create their own practices in relation to the school culture’s discourse and practices around making plans, saved signs, and
home toys. Using this perspective we can see how the school culture’s discourse about these practices has both constraints and affordances for the peer culture group. The peer culture group has to meet certain conditions, such as knowledge that if they have their home toys out, they have to share their toys with their peers. They took this constraint and adjusted it to meet their desire to share with certain peers by only negotiating or using the toys in or near their cubbies. Here, this perspective and the peer culture perspective really complement each other.

This section described the peer culture’s perspective on certain practices in the school culture that connect to superhero play including making plans, hiding, and the use of home toys. In the next section, I specifically explore children’s perspectives about superhero play.

**Children’s Perspectives on Superhero Play**

In this section I further examine children’s perspectives on superhero play related to affiliation, inclusion, power, leadership, value of artifacts, and expression of care.

*Affiliation*

Making connections with peers is an important value of the peer culture aligned with the development of friendships and affiliation. Having a shared knowledge about superheroes provided a way for the children to connect together around a common interest. Making friends and having successful social interactions is a common aspect of development in early childhood. These friendships are also often fleeting, however, in this group, superheroes was something that was a permanent connection. In an interview with Ron, I asked, “Why do you like to play superheroes with Donovan?” He responded,
“Because he’s my best friend.” [Interview Transcript, June 6, 2005]. In many of the interviews I conducted with the children, other children also referenced playing superheroes with other peers because they’re friends.

Jeanne: Why do you like playing superheroes with them?
Carlos: Because they’re my friends. They’re nice. They play with me.
[Interview Transcript, June 1, 2005]

Jeanne: Who do you play superheroes with?
Lien: Ron, Olivia, and Nick
Jeanne: Why do you play superheroes with them?
Lien: And they’re my favorite friends. They like to play with me all day. I play with Ron because he’s my boyfriend.
Jeanne: How come?
Lien: Because I married him. I asked him to. I do have a lot of boyfriends.
Jeanne: Who else?
Lien: Carlos
Jeanne: Anyone else.
Lien: Brian, Ron, Carlos…and Anthony, I guess.
[Interview Transcript, June 1, 2005]

Jeanne: What makes it fun?
Samantha: Cause we’re all together doing it.
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

Jeanne: Who do you play superheroes with?
Olivia: Ron, you, Donovan, Samantha, Lien, Nick
Jeanne: Why do you play superheroes with them?
Olivia: Because they always let me play. I want to play with them because they’re my best friends.
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

Jeanne: Why do you like to play with them?
Donovan: Because they let me.
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

Throughout each of these transcripts the children reference reasons for playing superheroes as either relating to being or wanting to be friends with the particular peers and/or because the other peers will play or will let the particular child play with them.
Here, a peer culture perspective may be the most compelling perspective (Corsaro, 1985; Kantor & Fernie, 2003). This perspective emphasizes that being a part of a peer culture group relates to the desire for connection to peers and affiliation. Through a feminist poststructural perspective, we can examine affiliation through issues of status and positioning. In several of the comments above, some children reference that they play superheroes with certain members of the group because “they let me” or “they play with me.” Through these comments, the children are highlighting the importance of being connected and being able to play with others in a group. It is possible that some of the children play and are interested in superheroes to be a member of the group. It is also possible that they want to be part of the group that plays superheroes because they feel that being a member of the group positions the child into a position of status. Thus, the reason for playing superheroes related to friendships is also connected to the children’s desire to be included in to group.

**Inclusion**

As children are developing friendships and peer culture groups, there are times children will be included and children will be excluded. Corsaro (1985) argues that this exclusion reflects the fragile nature of children’s interactions and believes the children are “protecting their interactive space.” For children it is easier to be included or find a way to be included if you have knowledge of the play scenario, if you are already a member of the peer culture group, or if you have an understanding of how to observe and figure out a role or contribution to the scenario that you could provide.
Olivia: “I’m playing with Lien. I’m playing with Jeannie.”
Alan: “You don’t have a Transformer.”
Olivia: “I’m just watching”
Alan: “It’s not a show.”
Olivia: “I make my own choices.”
Alan said something about it being too crowded.
Andrea: “How can you make this work?”
Lien then had her hand up.
Lien: “I’m watching with Olivia.”
Ron said, “Well if girls want to play than they can.”
Andrea: “It’s true.” [Field notes, April 14, 2005]

One way to interpret this scenario is from Alan’s perspective. Using Corsaro’s (1985) concept of protection of interactive space, I could argue that Alan was trying to protect the interactions that were developing between him and Ron. However, I also believe that Alan is practicing techniques used in the peer culture group to include and exclude to show his affiliation and status within the group. Alan, initially, was excluded from this peer culture group and it took several months for him to become a member. His status in the group is still sometimes fragile due to his limited popular culture knowledge. There are several instances in my field notes and videorecordings of Alan using exclusionary or inclusionary methods within the peer group. When Eric moved up to the preschool classroom from the infant/toddler room, he was positioned as the person to exclude. He also was very persistent and unlike Alan he had a lot of knowledge about superheroes in the popular culture. While there were frequent attempts to exclude him, he typically was able to find a way into the group, often by playing the “bad guy.”

Another way to examine the issue of inclusion is to look at the perspective of Olivia and Lien. They are two girls who are interested in joining the group even if just by initially watching. They use a strategy of choosing to watch, which is relatively non-
intrusive. Based on observations and interviews, the girls seem to want to be included in the group to play with the boys more so than to play superheroes. Through a feminist poststructural perspective, Lien and Olivia may be positioning themselves as children interested in superheroes to gain access and entry into the peer culture group (Davies, 2003). In this scenario, we can also examine how the children use elements of the discourse of a television program within their negotiations for entry and inclusion in the group (Foucault, 1980). Olivia states, “I’m just watching” and Alan responds, “It’s not a show.” Here, Alan is connecting Olivia’s comment about watching the play scenario and negates this attempt to enter by stating that their play is not a show and therefore she can’t watch it. While this attempt didn’t work, it is an interesting tactic. Thus playing superheroes can be seen as both a way to affiliate with the group and to try to be included in the group.

Power

The children are also interested in superheroes because they are able to exert power. When questioned about why they liked superheroes, the children often responded with ideas about or connected to power. Alan responded, “Because they’re strong” [Interview Transcript, June 1, 2005]. Many of the children also referenced powerful abilities or characteristics of the superheroes such as:

Samantha: “I like how Hawk Girl flies” [Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

Lien: “Superman has to punch the building and he can fly” [Interview Transcript, June 1, 2005]

Brian: “Because they’re just so cool. They’re awesome.” [Interview Transcript, June 6, 2005]
Alan: “And Flash Gordon. Because he shoots lightening out.” [Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

Tahira: “I like her book because its superheroes and it has a girl on the front. That’s power.” [Quote from “Goodbye book” to me]

All of these quotes represent power directly or powerful characteristics of superheroes, such as flying, shooting lightening, or just being awesome, which supports earlier research findings (Fernie, 1981). In play, the children are often testing their own limits and the power that they have. The children often use the climber as a site for superhero play. The climber is surrounded by two large mats and the children can jump, kick, and do other physically active movements here. The children sometimes test their limits by jumping over and over and trying to jump farther or higher. They are also sometimes trying out kicks and other “fighting” moves. This is a way the children test their physical power.

From a developmental perspective, the children may be connecting superheroes to power to practice aspects of their physical development and to make emotional connections about their self and identity. From a peer culture perspective, the children may be connecting superheroes to power as they are connecting to certain themes such as good vs. evil (Corsaro, 1985). Using a feminist poststructural perspective, the children may be positioning themselves as powerful and thus positioning themselves against the image of children being fragile and needing to be cared for (Davies, 2003). Similarly, from Foucault’s perspective, the children may be playing with power by using and accessing power in ways they do not have in other aspects of life (1980).
Leadership

The importance of leadership was discussed previously in the “becoming a member of the peer culture” section. This was a very important issue for the group of children as discussed. During interviews, several children referenced “being a leader” as a reason why they liked to play certain characters, such as Superman or Batman. Within these interviews, these children often commented that they sometimes cannot play these roles because other children have already taken the role.

Alan: Ron, he likes to be the good guy always and he doesn’t want to be the bad guy. It makes me…he always wants to be Superman.
Jeanne: Sometimes I noticed that he’ll be Martian Manhunter and you’ll be Superman
Alan: Now he won’t and he said I have to be Martian Manhunter
Jeanne: How do you feel about that?
Alan: Not good.
Jeanne: If that happens again how are you going to make that work?
Alan: Take turns
Jeanne: Do you ever have 2 Super Mans?
Alan: Yeah – but he said there is only one Superman.
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

In this transcript, Alan describes his feelings about not being able play his favorite character, Superman. In other conversations and observations, Alan has referenced Superman as being the leader and that is the reason why he wants to play him. In this situation, he describes how he used to to negotiate and try to take turns or have two Super Mans, however, he states that Ron will no longer negotiate for the role of Superman. In the following transcript below, Donovan also references Superman as his favorite character, but states that he does not play this character a lot, and I have never observed him playing the character of Superman either.
Donovan: Superman – because he punches.
Jeanne: Do you get to be Superman a lot? (I asked because I have never seen him play Superman)
Donovan: No
Jeanne: What happens if someone else is being Superman?
Donovan: Just be Green Lantern.
[Interview Transcript, May 31, 2005]

Here, Donovan explains that he just plays Green Lantern if someone else is Superman. In fact, I frequently observed him taking on supportive roles to the leaders in most play scenarios [see table 4.3], except for Star Wars. Thus, the desire to have leadership roles is common for many of the children, however, the opportunities to play the leader roles varies depending on who is involved in the scenario and if they’re willing to negotiate.

The issue of leadership is an important part of this peer culture group. Here, we have greater insight into the children’s direct perspective about this issue. The leadership dynamics are complex. Here Donovan and Alan both express their favorite character is Superman, however, Donovan has never or rarely plays Superman in the group, and Alan wants to play Superman more than he is able to.

Value of Artifacts

With this group of the children, the children had many artifacts related to superheroes. Some of the ways this became evident was through the amount of “home toys” the children brought into school. There were several occasions where one or more of the children went with one or both of their parents to buy a DVD of a new movie on the day it was released. An example of this happened with the release of the Incredibles DVD on March 15, 2005. At lunch Ron told me, “Do you know what? After school I’m going to get the Incredibles movie.” [Field notes, March 15, 2005] The next day, Brian
brought the insert from the DVD. In the afternoon, Donovan asked his mom if they could go to Target to get the DVD too. On the next day, Donovan and Brian both brought in the insert and Ron also brought his in too.

The children also used these artifacts as a way to threaten or try to manipulate the other children. The following scenario, “I Won’t Buy you a Power Ranger for Christmas” illustrates an example of this.

“I Won’t Buy you a Power Ranger for Christmas!”

At lunch, I was sitting with Brian, Ron, Alan, Elizabeth, Mei, Tahira, and a teacher assistant

Ron told Brian, “You’re my best buddy.”
Brian said, "No.”
He was upset about something that happened earlier in the day. (SA) tried to ask him about this.
Ron then said, “I won’t buy you a Power Ranger for Christmas then.”
Alan repeated, “Yeah, I won’t buy you a Power Ranger.”
Ron then said, “I will get you a Power Ranger for Christmas so you’ll be my best buddy.”
Brian said, "I'll buy my own Power Ranger.”
Alan said, “I’ll get a green Power Ranger if Ron had his blue Power Ranger and then he could play at his house.”
Ron said, “I don't have a blue Power Ranger. Green Power Rangers are not in Dino Thunder only Ninja Storm.
Brian shook his head up and down, but still looked upset.
Throughout lunch, Brian continued to disagree with almost everything that Alan or Ron said during lunch. After, they all went into the quiet room together for a story.

In this example there are several important aspects to analyze including aspects of affiliation, the use of artifacts to threaten and manipulate, and resisting these attempts to be manipulated Ron initially was interacting with Brian and expressing his feelings toward him through describing, “You’re my best buddy.” Brian rejected this expression
so Ron countered with his materialistic threat that he won’t buy him a Power Ranger for Christmas. Alan made the same comment, perhaps as an attempt to affiliate and connect with Ron. Brian resisted the threat from Ron and argued that he can buy his own Power Ranger, thus maintaining a position of power in this situation. Alan continues to try to affiliate with Ron by stating he’ll get a green Power Ranger if Ron has his blue one. Ron positions himself as knowledgeable about the Power Rangers by informing Alan that he doesn’t have a blue Power Ranger and in fact green Power Rangers are not in Dino Thunder, which is the Power Ranger show they are referring to. Brian positioned himself as someone who is also knowledgeable about the Power Ranger series as he agreed with Ron that the green Power Rangers are not in Dino Thunder. This scenario reflects not only the children’s value of the superhero artifacts, but also the children’s other values of knowledge and affiliation.

Expression of Care

These friendships provided the children an opportunity to express care for each other. Researchers have found that boys express care and friendship through rough and tumble (R&T) play (Reed & Brown, 2000; Reed, Brown, & Roth, 2000). Similar findings were found in the children’s superhero play as a form of R&T play. For example, in the following transcript, Ron expresses care for Donovan when Donovan has just been shot by the bad guys.

Donovan: “Oh no, the bad guys got me!"
Ron: "Donovan, are you ok?"
Donovan: "Yeah, I think so, I’m shot pretty bad."
Ron: "Let me see it, maybe I can fix you."
Donovan: "No, cuz now I’m the Human Torch! I’m on fire!"
In the following photos illustrate several examples of the children expressing care while engaged in superhero play.

Photograph 4.6: Example of Expression of Care
Photograph 4.7: Expression of Care Example 2

These photographs show this expression of care more visibly than words alone. The first photo shows one child dressed as Spiderman tending to an injured child. The second photo shows two children dressed as superheroes, Superman and Batman, and another child cuddling together on the mats in the block area.
The next transcript illustrates the expression of care within the peer culture group. The children were playing superheroes, during the middle of the play Alan becomes sad and states that he misses his mom.

Alan misses his mom

Ron arrived shortly before going outside. He had a Superman, Batman, and some type of Invisible character [on the playground I asked who it was, but he did not respond]. He gave the Superman to Alan and Batman to Anthony. He tried to give something to Brian, but he said he didn't want it.

Nick, Anthony, Ron, Brian, Carlos, and Alan were all playing together outside. They were running and chasing each other. After a bit, Nick and Anthony split off from the rest of the group.

Alan then started crying. Earlier, he had bumped and cut his lip before going outside. He said that he misses his mom. Andrea told me that this is something Alan has been doing lately. She said she and Kathy think it might be for attention and that his dad is very concerned about it and telling the teachers, "He doesn't like school."

Carlos came up to Alan. "What's the matter?" and Alan was wiping his eyes. Alan said, “I'm sad. I miss my mom.” Carlos then put his arm around Alan and walked around with him on the playground. Later, they sat together on the bank facing the cars with the parking meters. Carlos put his arm around Alan. Later Ron approached him. He also put his arm around him. Someone came up to play with them. Ron said, "No, we have to be with our friend Alan, because he's sad." Carlos was continuing to walk with his arm around him throughout most of the outdoor period.

Later in the day, Ron said, to me, "Do you what? Alan is sad. He misses his mom."

[Field notes, April 25, 2005]

This transcript provides another example of how the boys are able to express care. In this instance the boys were playing superheroes and then took the opportunity to care for Alan who was feeling sad and stating that he missed his mom. Both Carlos and Ron chose to use their outdoor play time to care for and comfort Alan who was feeling sad.
This demonstrates the friendship and care the boys have developed for each other.

Furthermore, Ron recounted the fact that Alan was missing his mom to me later in the day. Thus, it was something that was meaningful and important enough that Ron felt he needed to express this to me and inform me about this information.

Together, the transcripts and the photos provide evidence of the children using superheroes and superhero play as a way to express care and connect as peers. These modes of expression may be limited to the boys in other formats due to prescribed gender roles, where girl may have more open opportunities to express care directly and indirectly, such as through play family and taking on roles as moms and babies.

The expression of care through and connected to superhero play is important because it directly contradicts that image of superhero play as violent, which often leads to the play being banned or limited in some way (Holland, 2003). Through this play, the boys have been able to share and connect to each other through shared interests in superheroes. The final transcript illustrates how these connections were important enough to trade the active outdoor play time to comfort and care for a peer.

The peer culture’s perspectives about superhero play connect to important issues to the children about affiliation, knowledge, power, the value of artifacts, and the opportunity to express care. The school culture perspectives about superhero play focused on valuing children’s interests, providing opportunities for the children to have power, personal and professional challenges, gender, and inclusion/exclusion. These perspectives overlap in certain areas including valuing the children’s interests, power, and affiliation and issues of inclusion/exclusion. In this context, the peer culture’s interest in superhero
play intersected with the school culture in several ways. The following section describes these intersections.

**Superhero Play - Intersections between Peer Culture and School Culture**

What is the relationship of superhero play as an aspect of peer culture to the school culture context? Peer cultures are constructed in relationship to and along with the school culture group. They are interrelated. Additionally, there are other peer culture groups that are also being created within the classroom and these also intersect together and with the school culture. Overall in this classroom the school culture and peer culture were very fluid and often intricately connected. I believe this is able to happen because the teachers are very aware of the concept of a “peer culture” and understand the need for the children to create their own norms and practices in their groups. [Kathy and Andrea Interviews, May 13, 2005]. In the past there has been a lot of work about peer culture research conducted in this classroom and at this school. Therefore, they are very knowledgeable about this type of research and incorporate these ideas into the everyday practices of the school.

The teachers are also very knowledgeable and supportive of children playing superheroes and talking about other popular culture ideas. The teachers often include the children’s superhero ideas in songs during circle time and discuss different movies and television shows with children during lunch or snack. The teachers also go together to watch popular movies the children are discussing to be able to share their knowledge and interests.
…you know we’ll make kind of dates to see these movies that we know what everyone will be talking about [Andrea – Interview notes – March 4, 2005].

In response to the peer culture group, intersections between the school culture and peer culture group situated around superheroes occurred in the following ways: (1) superhero interests between peer culture groups, (2) superheroes and small group work, and (3) superheroes and classroom practices.

Superhero Interests between Peer Culture Groups

Interest in superheroes became a larger part of the school culture as it crossed into different peer culture groups. In the classroom there were three primary peer culture groups that I have labeled, “The Superheroes,” “The Bratz/Barbies,” and “The Kitties/Doggies,” based on their peer culture group interests. While some of the interests of the other peer culture groups connected to the other groups, such as playing family and cats/dogs, superheroes is the only interest that crossed into each of the other peer culture groups. For example,

“Dead Kitties”

Tahira, Nala, and Elizabeth were pretending to be “dead kittens.” They were lying down on floor of the gazebo outside. While pretending to be dead, Elizabeth was holding my hand and lying in my lap. Sophia came over. Upon seeing the dead kittens she said, “I know. We can get a superhero. Where’s Ron?” Sophia went to look for him. Tahira continued to pretend to be dead for almost 20 minutes. Sophia returned and said, “I can’t find help.” Nala, Sophia, Elizabeth and I ran out on the climber. We all slid down, looking for help from a superhero. [Field Notes – May 19, 2005]
Superheroes also became a part of the general peer culture group. As described earlier, in this classroom, the children bring their lunches to school and select their seat at a lunch table. Once the children find seats they usually put their hands together with the peer or peers they are going to be sitting with and push them up together in the air and shout “We’re Super Team.” Over the year I was in the classroom, I observed this routine on a regular if not daily basis among different groups of children. As some new children arrived, I also observed them starting to participate in the culturally constructed routine. While the primary purpose of the routine is to have the children find a seat for lunch, the teachers have set it up to allow the children the opportunity to construct a peer culture routine that has spread across the group and across time.

The teachers have observed and value this interest and have incorporated it into their school culture routine and practices. The schedule below details the school culture and peer culture practices, which were described in earlier sections, together with a final column detailing the intersections between the school culture and peer culture around superheroes and superhero plays. These intersections detail how the children bring their interest in superheroes to the given school culture practice and how the school culture responds to these interests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (all times are approximate and vary depending on the day/activity/children)</th>
<th>School Culture Routines</th>
<th>Peer Culture</th>
<th>Intersections of School Culture Peer Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:30-10:00</td>
<td>Children arrive at various times. They put their items from home in their cubbies.</td>
<td>Other children typically greet their peer group. Children sometimes take out items from their book bags they brought from home.</td>
<td>At this time, the children who are interested in superheroes will sometimes share their items from home. These items</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to share with their peers. Sometimes the peers are carrying the items in their hands as they walk into the door.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00-10:30</td>
<td>Circle Time</td>
<td>Children choose to sit next to favorite peers. Children interject popular culture ideas into songs, games, and sharing times. Children sometimes show objects to other peers that they have put in their pockets. Some children state superhero items during songs/games. Some children share superhero artifacts during sharing times. Children put superhero artifacts away into their cubbies before circle time because of the limit established by the children and teachers to do other activities other than superheroes after circle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-11:30</td>
<td>Free Play</td>
<td>Children engage in various activities set out by teachers/practicum students based upon children’s interests. Children engage in self-selected play themes and ideas. Children sometimes regulate other peers and state, “You can’t play superheroes now (Check notes for any quotes). Children interested in superheroes often engage in superhero type themes or activities in Dinoland or by using Legos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:00</td>
<td>Outside Play/Courtyard/Indoor Game</td>
<td>Peer culture groups often engage in similar play themes that become more active outside (i.e. kitties/doggies, house, princess, superheroes). Superhero games become more active and frequently involve running and chasing. The whole playground area is used with different bases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00-1:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Many of the children interested in superheroes have a superhero lunchbox. Some children bring superhero related food, such as gummies, potato chips with the Incredibles printed on them. Children often talk about their superhero items from home, television and movies they have seen related to superheroes, and make plans for how they will play superheroes after rest, or what superhero characters they will hold onto during rest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-1:30</td>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>Children sometimes bring a favorite book from home. If they want this as a story choice they bring it to the teacher earlier in the day and ask if it can be a story choice. Sometimes children bring superhero stories or comic books to be a book choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30-3:00</td>
<td>Rest</td>
<td>Children sometimes select an object from home to rest with. They are often stuffed animals or figures such as dolls or action figures. The children that are interested in superheroes often hold onto these objects during rest and frequently share these with other select peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00-4:00</td>
<td>Freeplay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00-4:30</td>
<td>Circle Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30-5:00</td>
<td>Freeplay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00-5:30</td>
<td>Outside Play/Courtyard/Indoor Activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30-6:00</td>
<td>Tabletop Activities/Last parent arrivals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>Parents arrive at various times from 3:00-6:00 to pick up their children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6: Schedule – Intersections of School Culture and Peer Culture (Superheroes)

226
Based on the school culture valuing children’s interests, the teachers often found ways to incorporate this interest into the classroom practices and curriculum. These include creating co-constructed limits about superhero play, integrating superheroes into the curriculum, such as through sharing books and providing props for play such as capes, and discussing superheroes with the children in casual conversations such as lunch and snack. The following are examples of some of the ways the school culture incorporated these interests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-constructed limits about superhero play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided books about superheroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to write books about superheroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided capes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided superhero costumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed movies/shows at snack/lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporated superheroes at circle time (songs, sharing, games)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought in newspaper article about Batman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought in Batman tracing to put on overhead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought in objects with knobs/buttons for flight play associated with Star Wars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7: School culture and superhero interests

In addition to these specific examples, the school culture provides many opportunities for the children’s interests in superheroes and superhero play to occur based on their open schedule with multiple opportunities for free play, discussions, and sharing and using items from home. Thus, the children’s interest in superheroes is very much a part of their peer culture group and the larger school culture, including the development of a small group, the “superhero” group.
The teachers at the school were very aware of children’s interests in superheroes and incorporated these interests into many aspects of the school culture. When I first started observing and conducting my research, the teachers had developed groups for the children to participate in small group work. The teachers decided on who was going to be in which group. One of the groups was the “superhero” group. The group consisted of Ron, Brian, Alan, Anthony, and Ryan. The teachers selected these children to participate in the group because they all had a strong interest in the play, but they also each had individual challenges. The group first met in September, 2004. Andrea invited me to observe the group.

Andrea tried to get the boys engaged. They were interested in the window and moving around in the space. Andrea tried to talk to them about superheroes. She asked them, “Who are superheroes?” Ron said, “I’m Superman.” [He was wearing a girl’s bathing suit over his underwear, which were Ninja Turtles, I think]. Andrea brought out a piece of paper to write their ideas down. However, Ron said something like “I don’t want any writing.” Andrea had to stop a wait for awhile while the boys chanted, “Thank you. Thank you.” After Andrea asked if they would rather play in the courtyard. They were interested in this. After a bit, the chanting began again with, “Andrea, Andrea.” Andrea asked the group about what they wanted to do in their group. She asked if they wanted to use their superheroes from home or to be superheroes. Ron responded first and stated that he wanted to bring his robot. Andrea asked, “What if you don’t have your robot with you?” Do you want to bring your toys from home or do you think you’ll need items from the classroom? They said they wanted their home toys. Andrea then asked what they wanted to call their group. Ron said, “Robot.” Andrea asked each person if they wanted to be called Robot. Each of the boys said yes when asked individually.

[Observation notes, September 27, 2004]
Afterwards Andrea then took the group to play on the courtyard. She discussed with me how this group was particularly challenging as they really resisted doing anything related to writing. She also stated that it was very difficult to get them engaged and participating as a group as she referenced their chanting, “Thank you. Thank you,” and “Andrea. Andrea” over and over. Andrea continued to try to get the group involved and connected in different ways, such as through the creation of superhero stories and superhero books as described above.

While these particular children resisted writing here, the children did use a literacy tool of the “saved signs” as a way to show inclusion as described in the section on peer culture. The teachers became aware of this practice in the peer culture and decided that they needed to work with the peer culture because the children who were excluded were frequently complaining about this practice to the teachers. I describe the intersection between the school culture and the peer culture around the use of saved signs in the next section.

Saved Signs – Intersections between Peer Culture and School Culture

The use of “saved signs” was something that was developed in the school culture as a way for children to save their work and constructions. Where saved signs were part of the school culture, the children appropriated the use of the “saved signs” as a way to show affiliation and as a way to include and exclude other peers. The teachers became aware of the peer culture practice of the use of saved signs and decided that it was becoming a challenge in the classroom, particularly for the children who were being excluded. Based on the teachers’ value of democratic practices, they brought the issue to
the children. The following is a description of the issue from the teachers’ perspective that was shared in the weekly curriculum guide that is shared with parents and all adults involved in the classroom.

Saved Signs (Exclusion)

Another literacy task has emerged from an issue that we’ve all been trying to figure out. When building work is happening in our block area, the children almost always create a “Save Sign” with their photo and name on it, taping it to their structure so that it will not be taken apart or changed. In recent months these “Save Signs” have taken on an additional meaning for some, as they have also become a sort of ticket for admittance into these structures. So that we can all share a common understanding of these signs, we will be spending some of our upcoming circle times crafting written guidelines for save signs in the block area. These guidelines will then be posted in the block area for everyone to reference. We anticipate that this process may take several days.  
[Curriculum Guide – April 4-15, 2005]

During this time, the teachers provided additional support around the use of saved signs as the children were using them to include and exclude. A specific document was not created about these rules, but based on my observations and field notes the children did not use the saved signs as a “ticket” as described. Therefore, through bringing the issue to the children and working together with them from their perspective, the teachers were able to assist with a practice that was becoming challenging from the point of the view of other children involved.

This section examined intersections between the peer culture and school culture including between peer cultures, superheroes becoming part of the routines of the school culture, the superhero small group, and the use of save signs. Superheroes became a large part of the school culture and influenced many different aspects.
Throughout these sections I have analyzed superhero play as part of the school
culture and peer culture, the perspectives about superhero play from the teachers and
children’s perspectives, and examined intersections between the peer culture and school
culture. In the final section of this chapter, I examine the use of multiple theoretical
perspectives. These perspectives were incorporated in the previous section, however, here
I examine a specific scenario and analyze the scenario through multiple theoretical
perspectives.

Multiple Theoretical Perspectives

How do multiple theoretical perspectives interpret and inform our understanding
of the phenomenon of superhero play? I have primarily analyzed superhero play through
the theoretical framework of peer culture (Corsaro, 1985) and through the perspectives of
the specific teachers and children involved in this particular classroom context. Our
understanding of superhero play can become more complex and rich through the
application of multiple theoretical perspectives. In this section, I analyze a rich scenario
applying a multiple theoretical analysis using the peer culture theory (Corsaro, 1985;
Kantor & Fernie, 2003), Feminist Poststructural concept of Positioning (Davies, 2003;
Walkerdine, 1985), and Foucault’s concept of Discourse (1980; Mills, 2003).

Here I provide an example of a scenario. I set the context through introducing the
children and teachers involved, describe the context before the event, and provide a
transcript of the event. After this event, I invited several of the participants to discuss the
scenario with me in a video revisiting session. I played the video clip and then asked the
children several questions.
The Power Ranger Valentine’s Cards

Children and Teachers in the Scenario

Carlos: Four-year old boy. Family is Latino. Speaks English and Spanish.
Alan: Four-year old boy. Family is Chinese. Just learned English this year.
Brian: Four-year old boy. Mother is African-American. Father is Caucasian.
Tahira: Three-year old girl. Family originally from Saudi Arabia.
Nick: Five-year old boy. Family from Denmark
Teresa: Practicum student teacher.
Ellen: Practicum student teacher

Context: Valentine’s Day. Earlier in the day, Nick gave many of the boys in the classroom Power Rangers Valentines Day cards, including Carlos, Alan, and Brian.

Many of the boys had been holding onto these cards throughout the day and showing them to other children in the class. They frequently commented, “Nick only gave them to boys.”

Previous to this vignette, Carlos, Alan, and Brian had a previous conflict with the blankets, at least according to the teacher’s perspective. She was concerned about their safety when they were rolling and bumping into each other while in the comforters since they could not see each other. She was able to recognize and support their interest in being together and helped them to figure out a solution that would work for the teacher and for the children. After about 10 minutes of negotiation, they were able to put the blankets over the climber and be together under there.

In this vignette, Carlos, Alan, and Brian are under the climber in the classroom. They are all holding onto these Power Ranger Valentine Cards under the climber. They have put two large comforters on top of the climber. They are all sitting under it and making noises that sound like they are pretending to drive a vehicle. You can only see the
children from the far right side of the climber, where a practicum student is sitting nearby.

Vignette: Alan and Brain are underneath the climber. Carlos gets up out of the climber to get his Power Ranger card that was on one of the tables on the other side of the classroom.

As he returns to the climber, he decides to quietly creep up and surprise his friends. He slowly approaches the climber from the left, which is in a location where they cannot see him. He climbs up over the two comforter blankets, and peeks into the open rectangular slab that is on the top of the climber. As he peeks down he screams, “AHHHHHHH!” Brian and Alan say, “AHHHHHHH!” in unison and then the three of them all laugh,

Tahira approaches the climber. “You see me come here” (inaudible – meaning unclear)
Carlos climbs into the climber.
Alan: “You can’t come in because it’s for boys.”
Carlos confirms, “It’s only for boys, right Brian?”
Tahira jumps up and down repeatedly on the mat saying, “They’re saying I can’t come in.” Teresa approaches the boys.
[In the background Brian says, “Where’s my card?”]
Alan: “A Power Ranger card. It’s a Power Ranger card. And, and, and we’re not playing her game.”
Carlos: “She doesn’t have a Power Ranger card.”
Brian comes out of the left side of the climber.
Tahira runs off saying, “I will get it.”
Ellen says, “Put your shoes on” as Tahira returns.
Tahira now has a folded up piece of pink paper.
Brian says, “Open, open, open that card” and looks at it.
Tahira opens up the card and shows Brian the card and then shows it to Alan and Carlos at the climber.
Alan, “It doesn’t have your name.”
Tahira, “Yes it does, see” (while pointing to writing on the card).
Ellen, another practicum student, responded, “There’s some writing on it. It could be her name.”
Brian: “But, but, but it’s not a card.” As he is saying this, Ellen is leading Tahira to get her shoes on.
Carlos says peering out from behind the blanket, “No. I mean the Power Ranger card Nick gave us.”
Alan: “Yeah”
Carlos: “That is the one you need.”
Brian, “That’s right. I got the REDAH one” (meaning the red Power Ranger) while holding the Power Ranger Valentine Card in the air.
Alan: “Yeah”
Brian: “Can someone scoot back?”
Alan, “Yeah, you need one like this.”

[Transcript from Videorecording, February 14, 2005]

In order to understand the children’s perspectives on this vignette more in-depth, I invited Carlos, Alan, and Brian to participate in a videorevisiting session. Brian and Alan chose not to participate. At the time, Brian was concerned about his father arriving early to pick him up. Alan may not have participated, because he did not know me very well yet. The following is a transcript of the video revisiting session with Carlos as the main participant.

I asked, “In the video you were all holding on to your Power Ranger cards. Were these important for your game?
Carlos shook his head up and down.
I said, "How come?"
He said, "Because we were playing DinoThunder."
I said, "You needed the cards for the game?" He shook his head up and down again.
At a certain point in the video a practicum student teacher came on the screen. Carlos said, "I hate that."
I said, "When the teacher comes over?"
He said, "No. Tahira."
I said, "How come?"
He said, "Because."
I said, "Why don’t you like when she comes?"
He said, "Because Brian, Alan, and I were playing together."
I said, "Is it hard if Tahira wants to come?"
He said, "She went and got a card but it was just a paper."
I said, "She needed a card with the Power Rangers on it?"
He said, "Yes"
I said, "How come?"
He said, "Because we were being Power Rangers."
I said, "So you needed a card with a Power Ranger on it to play the game."
He said, "Yes."
[Transcript of Video Revisiting Session, February 15, 2005]

The video revisiting session provided an opportunity for me to understand more about the context of the situation from Carlos’s point of view. Based upon the video and my observation, I did not realize they were actually identifying as the Power Ranger characters on their respective cards. I was also able to understand more about his feelings when Tahira tried to enter their play.

**Peer Culture Perspective**

Using Corsaro’s (1985) peer culture theory as a framework, there are several key concepts related to peer culture within this scenario. The group of boys is sharing a peer group interest in superheroes. Nick was knowledgeable of this interest and brought in Valentine cards for a selected group of peers, which were all boys. These Valentine cards were used as a marker of affiliation. The affiliation related to being affiliated to Nick and also being affiliated as a group that likes superheroes.

The group is also engaging in secondary adjustments according to Goffman (1961). The children are trying to create a hiding place with the use of two comforters. Based on the teacher’s perspective, the comforters were becoming problematic because she felt that it was not safe for them to be rolling and bumping into each other while in the comforters since they couldn’t see each other. However, from the children’s
perspective, the comforters provide a way to be out of sight from adults, to hide, and to also show affiliation as a group. The teacher was able to make an intersection between her perspective (school culture) and the children’s perspective (peer culture) and helped them to figure out a solution that would work for the teacher and for the children. After about 10 minutes of negotiation, they came up with a solution to put the blankets over the climber and be together under the climber.

This scenario also reflects Corsaro’s (1985) concept of the protection of interactive space. The group has been together for an hour, however as mentioned, they were having difficulty getting a play scenario happening due to the conflicts and negotiations occurring with the comforters. They are maintaining the interaction through holding onto the Power Ranger Valentine cards and staying under the climber. After only being under the climber with the comforters on top for a few minutes, Tahira tried to join the group. Alan, through trying to protect the fragile social interactions that had just “restarted” told Tahira that she couldn’t come in because she was a girl. This may have been the most salient feature for Alan to use to exclude. Carlos noticed that this wasn’t going to work because Tahira got a teacher to help her. He then used the Power Ranger cards as a means to protect their interactive space. Tahira tried to join the group by getting a Valentine card. Brian seemed like he was going to accept this as he asked to see her card, however Carlos said that it had to be the card that Nick gave them. He then negated any possibility of this working when he said that Nick only gave them to boys and since Tahira was a girl she did not receive a card from Nick, and therefore could not enter the play scenario. Tahira left with a teacher to get her shoes on. Brian then rejoined
the boys and they pretended to drive off together as they were able to retain their play scenario and their interactive space.

Thus, a peer culture perspective provides a rich understanding of the complexities of this scenario particularly from the perspective of the boys and their attempts to create and maintain social interactions in their peer culture group. It also shows how the school culture was able to make connections and support the peer culture’s interests, within the limits of the school culture and the teachers’ concerns for the children’s safety. However, this perspective has limits in terms of our understanding, particularly of Tahira’s perspective as she attempted to join the group.

_Feminist Poststructural Perspective_

Using a feminist poststructural perspective, specifically the idea of positioning (Davies, 2003; Walkerdine, 1981) we can provide a deeper understanding of this scenario through analyzing how gender positioning was used by both the boys and Tahira.

In the beginning at Tahira’s first attempt to join the group both Alan and Carlos use gender to position Tahira as someone who cannot join the group, because she is a girl.

Alan: “You can’t come in because it’s for boys.”
Carlos confirms, “It’s only for boys, right Brian?”

Tahira, however, resists this position and shows a complex understanding of a possible source of admission to the group through stating, “I will get it” and creating her own card. When she returns, Brian asks her to open the card to see it and is considering this as a possible entry to the group. Alan, however, rejects this and says that she can’t enter because it doesn’t have her name on it. Tahira continues to resist the exclusionary tactics
and confirms that the writing on the card is her name. Tahira demonstrated strong understanding of the situation and also showed persistence. It is unknown what would have continued to happen as the practicum student teacher had her leave the scenario to get her shoes on. Gender, however, continued to be the primary means of exclusion as the boys concluded as a group that the card she created would not work that it had to be the card that Nick gave and he only gave it to boys. Prior to the scenario, Nick provided 7 out of 8 boys in the class, Power Ranger Valentine cards. He created these at home and brought them into school. He passed these out saying they’re only for boys. In the vignette, Alan and Carlos both specifically state at different times that SS, a girl, cannot come into the climber because it is for boys. Alan uses this exclusionary tactic immediately. It could be that this was the most salient characteristic for him to use as a means of exclusion. Carlos emphasizes that she has to have a card in order to get into the climber. After she brings a card she has made, Carlos claims that it won’t work because it doesn’t have her name on it. A practicum student teacher tries to support Tahira by saying it has some writing on it, however Carlos then reverts back to it emphasizing that she has to have the card that Nick gave out and this is not going to be possible because he only gave them to boys. Throughout this scenario there were several exclusionary tactics used, however, the children emphasized and reverted back to gender as the main exclusionary tactic.
While the feminist poststructural perspective helps to provide a more complex understanding of the scenario through the concept of positioning, there are some aspects that it cannot examine, such as specific aspects about discourse and voice that can be examined from a Foucauldian perspective.

**Foucauldian Perspective**

Using Foucault’s (1980; Mills, 2003) concept of discourse and voice, we can analyze this scenario from another perspective. According to Foucault (1980) discourse both constrains and provides opportunity for voice. In this scenario, I am using discourse in two ways. First, the discourse of the superhero genre, specifically of the Power Rangers and secondly, from the discourse of superhero play from the general teacher and adult perspective. The Power Rangers is a television series that started in the United States in 1993 as The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and has since then “morphed” into several different series and movies including Power Rangers Ninja Storm, Power Rangers Mystic Force, and Power Rangers DinoThunder (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113820/). In all of the series, the Power Rangers consist of a team of mostly boys and at least one girl Power Ranger who work as a team to fight “evil/bad guys.” Thus, the television series and movies of Power Rangers developed a discourse of Power Rangers working together as a team to fight evil. Through identifying with the characters, the boys in this scenario are constrained by the discourse to be a team and that you have to be a certain color of Power Ranger.
The discourse from teachers and adults related to superhero play positions this type of play as aggressive, repetitive, and an interest of boys. This constrains both the children interested in superheroes and adults to focus on these aspects of the play, perhaps, over other aspects. Despite these constraints, however, the discourse here also provides many opportunities for voice. Here, the boys are identifying as superheroes through the Valentine cards without engaging in any fighting or even a danger/rescue situation. The Power Rangers are being used as a way to identify with one another as a peer group, a team. Tahira, also, has voice within the discourse as a girl who is interested in superheroes or at least interested in participating in the scenario and also has voice to resist the gender discourse.

Through analyzing the scenario through multiple perspectives the multiple meanings of superhero play become even more apparent. It is a complex and multifaceted aspect of children’s play and there is not one clear explanation of a specific meaning. Using multiple perspectives together helps illustrate the complexities of superhero play because alone, each perspective has limits and constraints.

Summary

The findings of this study challenge the discourse that emphasizes superhero play as aggressive and violent (Boulton, 1996; Levin, 1998; Pellegrini, 1995, 1998; Schafer & Smith, 1996; Smith & Boulton, 1989, 1990; Wegener-Spohring, 1994) and primarily an interest of boys. In this context, the primary children interested and involved were boys, however, there were many girls that were frequently interested and they were able to create the opportunities for new roles that spread into the peer culture group.
Furthermore, the findings emphasize the meanings of superhero play in the peer culture particularly related to being a member of the peer culture, such as affiliation and inclusion and to issues of identity, such as gender and leadership. They also highlight how the role of knowledge led to shifting patterns in leadership through the selection of roles and as leaders of the group. The findings also illustrate how the school culture and peer culture intersected around superhero play, particularly in the multiple ways superheroes and superhero play became a part of the school culture life such as through the formation of small groups and the co-construction of limits on this type of play. In the concluding chapter, I discuss the study related to the research questions and present possible implications of the study for practice and future research.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Superhero play is a complex and multifaceted form of play. Through this ethnographic study, I attempted to understand the meanings of this play from the perspectives of the people involved, the teachers and children, in one early childhood classroom. As the findings illustrate, superhero play does not mean just one thing and individuals, both children and teachers, have different thoughts and ideas about this play. In this chapter I discuss the overall study through examining multiple perspectives on superhero play, methodological reflections, and the limitations and implications of the study.

Discussion of Multiple Perspectives on Superhero Play

In this section I discuss pertinent findings in relationship the research questions. Here, I reverse the questions to highlight the most important aspects of using multiple perspectives and the children and peer culture’s perspectives on superhero play first.

Using Multiple Perspectives to Study Superhero Play

The use of multiple theoretical perspectives provides an alternative analysis and understanding of superhero play. Just as superhero play doesn’t mean the same thing to every individual child or every peer culture group, there are also alternative ways to understand the meaning of the same situation or context through analyzing it through
other theoretical perspectives. Using multiple perspectives challenges us to view superhero play in different ways. Through examining it more complexly in an analysis of “The Power Rangers Valentine’s Cards” I was able to analyze this situation from the perspectives of Corsaro’s (1985) peer culture theory, the feminist poststructural perspective (Davies, 2003; Walkerdine, 1981), and a Foucauldian perspective (1980). Each provided a different perspective.

The peer culture theory examined social issues of affiliation, secondary adjustments and protection of interactive space as the children used the cards to show membership and determine who could and could not be included. The feminist poststructural perspective examined positioning from both the boys and the girl’s perspective that was trying to join the group. The Foucauldian perspective examined the children in relationship to the larger discourse about superheroes from the media and from the perspective of adults and teachers. Through only examining one perspective, our understanding of the situation would be limited. A multiple perspective analysis provided an understanding from the peer culture group, the girl who was trying to join the group, and from examining the relationship between the children and larger discourses from the media and other adults.

This multiple perspective analysis was used throughout the study through examining the perspectives of teachers, children, and applying multiple theoretical analysis. This dissertation uses multiple perspectives to understand the superhero play. The perspectives used included the perspectives of the people involved, the children and teachers and multiple theoretical perspectives, including sociocultural and poststructural.
Previous literature on superhero play has emphasized the perspectives of teachers and the developmental perspective. These perspectives often overlap through either teachers supporting superhero play due to potential developmental benefits in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development or banning or limiting the play due to concerns in areas of development, usually social or emotional (Holland, 2003). Alternatively, a multiple perspective lens allows an in-depth examination and a deeper understanding of superhero play. Through applying multiple perspectives to examine superhero play, we are able to examine different aspects including the perspectives of the children involved and alternative theoretical perspectives that examine other aspects of superhero play including peer culture meanings, gender, caring, and identity development.

Applying multiple perspectives to understand superhero play is valuable because it supports a deeper understanding the phenomenon by examining and at times integrating various perspectives. At times, one perspective may be more compelling than another, and in some instances my data supported one perspective more than another, such as the peer culture perspective (Corsaro, 1985). However, at times, the issues are very complex and there are many perspectives that are viable to apply and to inform meaning about superhero play. For example, in this study the issue of inclusion and exclusion during superhero play came up through all of the different perspectives including the teachers, children, and the multiple theoretical perspectives. This issue is not exclusive to superhero play and occurs during many forms of children’s play. It is very complex and there are many different ways to examine the meaning about children using inclusionary and exclusionary tactics during play. By using only one or limiting our perspectives about
these issues, it limits our understanding about the multiple possibilities for the use and meanings of inclusion and exclusion.

From a peer culture perspective, the children’s exclusionary tactics are viewed by Corsaro (1985) as the protection of interactive space as the children try to maintain the social interactions with the peers they are already playing with. Using a feminist poststructural perspective, the issue of exclusion in play can be viewed as a way to position people, both others and oneself. Through this positioning, issues of power can arise and using a critical lens, these exclusionary tactics can be viewed as mirrors of oppression in society (i.e. excluding based on race and/or gender) (Davies, 2003; Walkerdine, 1981). The teachers may feel the exclusionary means are problematic because children’s feelings are hurt and the children are complaining to the teachers about not being able to play in certain areas. The children may feel that excluding children feels powerful. None of these perspectives are necessarily right or wrong. Applying the multiple perspectives allows an examination of the complexity of issues of exclusion and inclusion and the many possible meanings.

Using and applying multiple perspectives may be very useful for teachers when examining their own practices, particularly in relation to superhero play. As shown here, superhero play is complex and it is not solely an issue of allowing or now allowing it in the classroom. Analyzing issues and children’s play through multiple perspectives may allow teachers greater insight into the complexity of children’s play and better inform their decisions. In this classroom, the teachers considered multiple perspectives including
their own, the children’s, and at times theoretical perspectives when making decisions about superhero play in the classroom.

*Superhero Play in the Peer Culture*

An important aspect of this study was the examination of superhero play from a peer culture perspective. This study builds on the work of other researchers that have examined peer culture (Corsaro, 1985; Elgas, Klein, Kantor, & Fernie, 1988; Fernie, Kantor, Klein, Meyer, & Elgas, 1988; Kantor & Fernie, 2003). It compliments similar findings about peer culture about children using exclusionary tactics as a protection of interactive space (Corsaro, 1985) and children using superheroes as a form of affiliation (Elgas, 2003; Elgas et al., 1988; Kantor et al., 1989). Kantor et al. (1989) found that the children used superhero capes as a marker of affiliation in the peer culture. This study provides new information about how children use superheroes in their peer culture not just for affiliation, but also for ways to exert power, demonstrate leadership, and use superhero artifacts to negotiate entry to the group and to exert power over other children to maintain and threaten social relationships. It also provides a more specific examination of peer culture at the level of the individual members.

To describe the peer culture connected to superheroes, I situated it within the school culture context. I chose to do this to illustrate how the development of the peer culture is situated within the school culture context. I was able to gain an understanding of the children’s peer culture through my direct participation as a participant observer. Through playing with the children, I learned about the play, about the children themselves, and about the meaning of the play from the children’s point of view. This
participation was essential to understand their perspective, because I also felt and shared many of their feelings. As part of my research I needed to become a member of the group and this mirrors the feelings and experiences of young children as they are trying to become a member of a peer culture group.

Like the children, I was often included and excluded from the group. The best days for me were the days I was instantly approached, “Jeannie, come play in the block area.” The worst days were when I arrived in the classroom and I was not greeted by anyone. I would walk through the room searching for a close friend to play with. Sometimes I would sit alone and watch the other children play as I waited for other children to arrive. Fortunately for me, this didn’t usually last too long, but it is an uncomfortable feeling as you wait to belong. This really helped to put me in the perspective of the children who were being excluded from play. Interestingly, as I became a member of the group, I also felt challenged by children who wanted to join our group as we were involved or starting to negotiate play. It was very challenging to interrupt the group dynamics to deal with a child who wanted to join the group.

Like other children in the group, I have popular culture knowledge of superheroes, such as the Justice League and Star Wars, from my childhood. As a classroom teacher, I acquired knowledge of the more current superheroes of the 1980s and 1990s, such as The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and the Power Rangers. However, I did not have current knowledge. Thus, I chose to engage in understanding more about the current television series and movies as they arose based on children’s interests. I watched Teen Titans and some of the multiple Power Ranger series. I bought the
Incredibles DVD and watched it many times as this became quite powerful. This knowledge did provide me access in the group. As with other children with this knowledge, the children would sometimes ask me what a specific character’s superpower was, or who were the girl characters in the show.

This direct entry into the children’s play was essential to understand the play. For example, early in the year I was not as involved in the children’s play. The play scenario, “The Power Rangers Valentine Cards,” is from a videorecording of the children’s play that I was not involved in. Through a video revisiting session I was able to understand more about the play. However, if I relied on only a videorecording of the play, I would have limited knowledge and understanding of the meaning at the peer culture level. The video revisiting provided understanding at another level, however, actually playing and being engaged directly with the children provided me with the most understanding of the children’s point of view together with my feelings as a participant in the peer culture group.

Becoming a member of the peer culture group was important to not only understand the peer culture dynamics, but to specifically attempt to understand the children’s perspectives about superhero play. I analyzed these perspectives at both the group level and at the individual level. A summary of the children’s perspectives and specific challenges to this area are described in the next section.

In order to understand superhero play, it is essential to try to understand it from the children’s perspective. I attempted to do this through several different modes including being directly involved in their play, discussing their play with them in
conversations, and having them discuss their play through specific questions through video revisiting sessions and interviews. This work builds on the research examining children’s perspectives (Cosaro, 1985, 2003; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988, Mandell, 1988) and provides an initial examination about children’s perspectives about superheroes as there have not been any previous studies specifically examining this perspective. It provides new insight to children’s perspectives at both the group and individual level.

In the children’s perspective, I analyzed their perspective about the school culture concepts of making plans, being visible to adults, the use of saved signs, and home toys I also analyzed children’s perspectives about affiliation, inclusion, power, leadership, value of artifacts, and the expression of care. Through this analysis I was able to understand their perspectives about important features of the school culture that directly impacted on their peer culture, such as making plans, and I was able to understand more about their specific perspectives about important aspects of superhero play including affiliation and power. My primary purpose here was to provide a forum to share the children’s voices on something that is important to them. Through using multiple methods and getting to know the children overtime and as a peer, I hope their voices are able to be heard and are presented in a genuine and authentic way. This question was the most challenging for me, both on a methodological and analytical level. Even though I believe I have engaged in very sound research practices to understand the children’s point of view, I have to question how much I can truly understand their perspective. Here, I believe I faced several challenges.
First, I am almost 30 years older than the children involved in the study. While I have knowledge and was able to share interests with them, I am also old enough to be their parent. Along with this, I could never completely engage in the exhilarating play and sheer physical enjoyment they seemed to have through running and chasing each other. While I did participate in this frequently, it was never on level with their engagement and enjoyment.

Second, I am a female and most of the children involved were male. During play, I was consistently positioned into female roles and often as a victim that needed to be rescued. As I wanted to follow through lead in play, I usually did not challenge this positioning. One day, however, I decided that as a member in the peer culture, I too have agency and I can make decisions about who and how I want my role to be.

On an individual level, I became closer to Donovan and Alan than I did to Ron and Brian. Therefore, I may have a different perspective and understanding of the individual children based on our own relationships. As with all aspects of an ethnographic study, my representation is partial and situated within my perspective.

Through analyzing the peer culture perspective at both the group and individual level, I was able to gain new insight into children’s views about superhero play. These perspectives about superheroes being primarily important socially and emotionally provide new insight into the question, “Why are children interested in superheroes and superhero play?” This question is too broad to answer from this type of a study, however, this study does provide some information from the point of view of this particular group.
of children. In this context, the children were able to share and explore their interest in superheroes in a school culture context that supported this interest.

The Importance of Caring

In this study, the children used superhero play and the connections as a peer culture group around superheroes as a way to express care for each other. This is an important finding to highlight as it directly contradicts the image of superhero play as violent and aggressive (Boulton, 1996; Levin, 1998; Pellegrini, 1995, 1998; Schafer & Smith, 1996; Smith & Boulton, 1989, 1990; Wegener-Spohring, 1994). It also supports the research that shows children express care and friendship and affiliation through rough and tumble play (Reed & Brown, 2000; Reed, Brown, & Roth, 2000; Smith & Boulton, 1990). However, in this study, the children did not only express care for each other in the “rough and tumble” aspects of superhero play. The children expressed care for each other also in the context of the superhero scenario as the children stopped their play to support Alan when he missed his mom. Here, superhero play provided a connection for the peer culture group to become close and therefore develop friendships and connections that supported the expression of care among the group.

Mediation and the Intersections between the Peer Culture and School Culture

Mediation between the school culture and peer culture influenced and shaped how and why superhero play occurred and happened the way it did in this particular classroom. This study documented how superheroes and superhero play were a part of both the peer culture group interested in superheroes and became part of the school culture as was illustrated in the section examining intersections between peer culture and
school culture. These intersections did not just happen, but were constructed together between the children and teachers. In these intersections, the teachers were acting as mediators. Here I will discuss some examples of mediation by the teachers and how this may be important and useful for other teachers when considering superhero play.

In order for superhero play to occur and be supported in this context, it became part of the school culture context. Through thick description, I described the school culture in relationship to superhero play. Through doing this, I also provided rich description of the overall school culture practices including the activities, language, and values of the school culture. This description highlights how the school culture practices supported the children’s interests in superheroes. It also provides an example of the complexity and depth of the social construction of school culture practices.

The teachers in this study are knowledgeable and supportive of superhero play in the classroom. They have had children in the past who have been interested in superheroes and have discussed how to support superhero play in the classroom to teachers at conferences, workshops, and to practicum students in their classroom. The teachers openly shared their perspectives with me in conversations, interviews, and through preparing and presenting at the annual NAEYC conference in 2005. They integrated superheroes into many aspects of the curriculum and demonstrated how superhero play can be connected to professional education standards. They also faced challenges at a personal and professional level and these varied individually. Additionally, based on the group of children, the teachers had to implement limits on superhero play and other play using home toys during this school year, which they had
not done in the past. These intersections and challenges provide rich information about how children’s interests, including popular culture interests such as superheroes, can be incorporated into an early childhood classroom.

These examples provide important information for teachers who may feel challenged about how to incorporate children’s interests into the classroom. The teachers’ challenges personally, such as Kathy’s feelings about gun play, and professional challenges associated with assisting practicum students with guidance and discipline in the classroom, may also connect to teachers who want to value and incorporate children’s interests, but feel conflicts personally, professionally, or both.

Here, I presented their perspectives through my analysis and interpretation. I chose what aspects I thought were most salient and important to highlight. These perspectives are also situated in a specific period of time and might not reflect current or past perspectives. Through sharing their thoughts and perspectives, the teachers also provided the context to understand why they changed their perspective on superhero play with this particular group of children. This may be a useful example for other classroom teachers that are considering incorporating superhero play or are struggling with aspects of it. It demonstrates that teaching and classroom practices are not and do not have to be fixed. Teachers can and have to be flexible based on the current children and classroom context. Thus, as with other classroom practices, teachers’ practices related to superhero play do not have to be fixed. They can be dynamic just as all other practices in the classroom.
In terms of the teachers’ perspectives, they provide an important addition to the views of superhero play from teachers in their own classrooms (Gronlund, 1997; Pena et al., 1987) and from the sociopolitical perspective (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1987, 2006) that is prominent in the discussions about superhero play in early childhood classrooms. The teachers here situate themselves in a sociocultural perspective, including an understanding of superhero play being a part of the children’s peer culture lives (Corsaro, 1985; Kantor & Fernie, 2003). Their perspectives contribute to the work examining the intersections between peer cultures and school cultures (Elgas, 2003; Elgas, et al., 1988; Fernie et al., 1988). It provides a new understanding of the personal and professional challenges teachers face in the classroom and adds an important contribution for other teachers reflecting on how to incorporate superhero play in their classroom.

Other researchers have also found that teachers have integrated superheroes into the school culture, such as through dismissal during circle time (Kantor et al., 1989). This work expands on this through showing a detailed examination of the multiple ways superheroes became intersected into the school culture context through almost all aspects of the school culture’s daily routine [See Tables 4.6 and 4.7].

The intersections between peer culture and school culture involve the intersections between the perspectives of the teachers and the perspectives of the children. Sometimes these perspectives align and sometimes they may conflict. In either case, the teachers’ role becomes one of a mediator in order to attempt to align the perspectives, while respecting both points of view. In any classroom, a teacher can take on this role when making decisions, however, if the teacher does not consider the
children’s perspective and/or holds his/her perspective at a greater value then there is not mediation. Mediation occurs when both perspectives are considered and valued and decisions are made considering all points of view.

In this classroom, the teachers valued and incorporated the children’s interest in superheroes into the school culture throughout the entire school day as illustrated in Table 4.6 [Schedule – Intersections of School Culture and Peer Culture (Superheroes)]. They also integrated these interests into the curriculum as described in Table 4.7: School culture and superhero interests. These intersections and integrations occurred through mediation between the teacher and children.

One of the primary instances of this mediation occurred through the co-construction of classroom limits around superhero play during free play time. The teachers felt concerned about the children’s overall development because they were spending so much time engaged in superhero play and the use of certain home toys, such as the superhero action figures and the Bratz dolls. The teachers could have decided to ban these toys during one or both free play periods, however, this would have been putting their perspective at the front and limiting or ignoring the children’s perspective. Rather, they mediated the situation by bringing both parties, the children and the teachers together, to work out a solution. The solution became allowing the children to use their toys from home during the first free play time in the morning and after rest and limiting the use of these toys and the more active forms of play, such as the jumping and kicking during superhero play.
The teachers also integrated the children’s interests in superheroes into the curriculum through such examples as having the children write books about superheroes and using backmapping to show how superhero play can connect to the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards. The teachers used mediation to balance their responsibilities as educators to the children’s education and development together with valuing children’s interests.

Mediation is also critical in the direct context of the children’s play. The teachers chose to not only value the children’s play and interests, but to also become knowledgeable about the children’s interests through watching movies the children were discussing and having conversations with children about their interests during play and during meals, such as lunch and snack. With this knowledge, the teachers were able to understand the context of children’s play and also to understand what the children were discussing.

These examples demonstrate how integrating superhero play in the classroom is complex and understanding multiple perspectives and how teachers need to mediate at multiple levels through making decisions about classroom practices, curriculum, and directly in children’s interactions. The intersections between the school culture and peer culture occurred because of the use of mediation from the teachers. This mediation was purposeful and based on the teachers’ knowledge and value of the children’s perspective. The teachers used mediation to help them to facilitate this play through providing limits, giving resources, and guiding the play. This highlights the important role of the teacher in
superhero play. In this context, superhero play happened through the joint construction and mediation between the teachers and children.

**Methodological Reflections**

Engaging in an ethnographic study is an intensive activity due to the time spent in the setting, the voluminous data collected, but primarily related to the development of relationships with the participants. In this section I reflect on these issues through examination of the data collection and analysis and my role as a participant observer.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Throughout my time in the classroom, I collected a large amount of data through field notes, interview transcripts, audiorecordings, videorecordings, children’s artifacts, photographs, and classroom artifacts, such as seminar and meeting notes and weekly curricular guides. Fortunately, the majority of my data was collected and stored digitally through typed notes and interviews, digital audiorecordings, and digital photographs. The use of technology saved me both time and space as well as it provided me with a way to organize and analyze the data through the HyperResearch program. I was also able to use video as a methodological tool through the use of video revisiting.

**Video Revisiting**

One of the biggest methodological challenges I faced was the use of video revisiting. I found the research technique of video revisiting both extremely useful and extremely challenging. Early on I became eager to use this technique as I saw it usefulness and promise as a research tool both for my study and for other similar studies trying to understand children’s perspectives in another format. I also thought that it would
be a useful way to perform a modified type of “member check” with the children. In this section I describe the challenges and recommendations to using video revising as a research technique.

Challenges. I decided to invite a small group of children to view an interesting scenario I both observed and videotaped titled, “The Power Ranger Valentine Cards.” The scenario took place on February 14, 2005 and I invited the group of children to observe the tape that afternoon. I had been in the classroom for about 6 weeks so I thought I was establishing myself in the classroom and that this would be an appropriate time to watch the tape. Together with the teachers we decided to set up the video in a small room separate from the classroom where the children sometimes do small group with the teachers. One of the teachers offered to come with me, but said that it was fine for me to take them there by myself too. I decided that the second option would be best to establish a place where the children could talk to me about their play separate from the teachers. I invited 3 of the children to come and watch the scenario with me, Brian, Carlos, and Alan. This was happening in the afternoon after rest. I was not aware of it, but Brian’s mom was coming early to pick him up and he was anxiously awaiting her arrival. I asked Carlos first, as he is generally very interested and agreeable. He agreed to come with me. I asked him to help me ask Brian and Alan, figuring that they might be more interested if invited by a peer. Brian refused, I think he said, “Maybe later,” and shortly thereafter his mom came to pick him up. We approached Alan and he refused, so for the first session Carlos was my only participant.
Over time, however, the children were willing and sometimes eager to come to the video revisiting sessions. This setup presented challenges for me because it put me in a different role than what I was in the classroom. In the classroom, I did not participate in any discipline or limit setting, however, during the video revisiting I had to do some limit setting. The main limits I had to set were about not touching the camera, VCR, and television, to listen and watch the video, and to listen to someone else when they were speaking. Each time I did a video revisiting session I worried that I was compromising my role as a researcher in the classroom. I contemplated having a teacher come in with me to set limits if needed, however, I felt that this would really change the situation.

Additional challenges arose during each session as different children were involved, and therefore, sometimes it was a novel event for the child or he/she had only done this activity once before. It was often difficult to have several children involved as one child tended to dominate the conversation and it was difficult to allow all children an opportunity to share his/her perspective.

Recommendations. I think there are many benefits to using video revisiting as both a research and teaching tool. If I am going to use it again in the future I will try some or all of the following recommendations.

- Invite the teachers to use it in the classroom as a teaching tool. Align the use of it as a research tool with how the teachers are using it in the classroom.
- Invite individual children primarily
- Limit groups to 2 or 3 children
- Only use groups of children after all children have participated in at least one video revisiting session individually and understand the procedure.
- Use a laptop or portable DVD player to playback video
- Conduct video revisiting session as soon as possible after the classroom activity occurred.
I believe the video revisiting can be a great tool for classroom teachers as Forman (1999) describes. Therefore, I think a researcher could invite teachers to use this as a teaching tool and/or use this as a tool in the classroom together with the children and teachers and use themselves as a classroom resource.

I set up the study to invite children together as a small group or pair to do the video revisiting sessions as I thought this would make them more comfortable. As the study progressed, I realized that the children were quite comfortable with me and that this was not an issue. I think the group can be beneficial, particularly as children share and clarify their views to each other, however, I think as a tool it is best to have the children understand the procedures individually and later participate as a group.

During the study, I did not have a laptop that played DVDs or a DVD player. I borrowed a video camera from the university as often as possible to record and playback video through a television available at the site. I also sometimes borrowed the video camera in the classroom. I strongly believe that having a portable means to playback the video is the easiest way, particularly to be able to playback video in a short period of time. I was able to usually do a video revisiting session the day of or the next day at the latest, following a video clip I wanted to show the children. However, even in the afternoon, but especially the next day, it was challenging for the children to recall the scenario.
Role as a Participant Observer

Becoming a participant observer is one of the main roles of the researcher in an ethnographic study (Spradley, 1980). To start my research study, I positioned myself as an observer and interested participant in the children’s play. Initially, I was mostly welcomed into the peer culture group that was interested in playing doggies, kitties, and family. The group members were mostly girls with some boys joining the group at times, but not having this type of play as their primary interest. The children were interested in me being their pet and I spent many mornings and afternoons crawling around the classroom. I wore through several pairs of pants and my knee frequently hurt as I crawled across the linoleum tile in the other half of the classroom.

Moving from one peer culture to the next

In order to become a member of the classroom, I initially was invited into play by a different peer culture group than the peer culture interested in superheroes. This group consisted primarily of the younger girls in the classroom who were interested in playing kitties and doggies. I played with this group and eventually became seen as an “adult who plays” by the other children. This eventually provided me with entry and access to the “superhero” peer culture group. As I changed peer culture groups, I felt like a junior high student moving from one clique to another one. In order to address this, I tried to also play with this other group as well at certain points during my time in the classroom. As I became more involved in the superhero play, I noticed that some of the girls in the other peer groups also seemed to become more interested in the play. I wondered if I was influencing and changing the dynamics of their own play and peer culture groups.
During the study, there were two children who became interested in developing a closer friendship with me than the other children. These children were Mei and Donovan. Here, I provide some background information on Mei as she was not described earlier in the study. In the classroom, Mei was usually very quiet. The other children seemed to like her, but she often played on her own. Mei’s family is from China and English is her second language. She communicated very little with either the children or teachers. Over time she became more and more interested in being near me and would frequently come and sit by me. She started to interact with me by putting a toy Snoopy doll on my head and then laughing. This happened every day for awhile. I was both happy and concerned about the relationship. I was happy that she was connecting with another person and I felt that I could help her connect to other peers. She, however, was not interested in playing with the superhero group very much. Occasionally she would play trucks with Alan and they would chase each other around near the block and circle area. I struggled because I felt that my relationship with her was keeping me away from accessing the peer group interested in superheroes. As the relationship developed, I was becoming positioned by the other children as Mei’s friend. At the beginning of the study I did consider maybe changing my study to focus on her as an individual or the group that was interested in the kitties/doggies, however, I decided instead to play with her for a certain amount of time and then move on and play with or observe another group. Sometimes she would come and sit by me and also observe the superhero group.
The friendship that developed with Donovan partially helped me access the superhero group. Donovan’s mother expressed concern to the teachers that she felt Donovan was becoming “obsessed” with me. He insisted on inviting me to his birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese and his mom was very reluctant about this, however, decided to let him since he was so insistent. Since I was aware of her concerns I tried to decide what to do. Eventually I decided not to attend the birthday party, partially out of respect for her concerns and also out of concern with how I would fit in the peer culture in a different context. As I have been to Chuck E. Cheese when I was younger I had a sense of what it was like and realized my role as a peer would be limited due to my larger size and limits placed on entry to certain areas based on regulations of the establishment. I also thought that it would be important for Donovan to develop relationships and play with his peers his own age in this setting too. I questioned, “Had my role as a peer gone too far?”

I continued to process these thoughts and ideas throughout the study in my personal journal, in conversations with the teachers, and with my peers. In these writing and conversations with my peers particularly, I also wrote and discussed other challenges and possible limitations of the study.

In this section, I reflected specifically on the methodology in this study, specifically on data collection and analysis and my role as a participant observer in the ethnographic study. The one perspective that was beyond the scope of this study was an examination of the parent and family perspectives on superhero play. In the following section I will describe other limitations of the study.
Limitations of the Study

This study offers a rich example of superhero play in an early childhood classroom. Through it we learn not just about superhero play, but also about the rich dynamics and complexities of classroom lives, through an examination of the school culture and one peer culture group. There are two primary limitations to the study: class and doing research with children.

*Class*

This ethnographic study represents the story of superhero play in one peer culture group in one school culture during one particular year. As such, it is situated in the practices, participants, and interactions among the participants in this particular context. The school is a laboratory school on a large Midwestern University campus. It is open to the community and university faculty and staff. All of the children in the school are from middle or upper middle class families with most of the families with two parents who both work full-time jobs or are full-time students with graduate assistantships at the university. The children here had access to a variety of aspects of popular culture, such as action figures and toys from fast food restaurants and stay on top of the latest movies and television shows. While these artifacts may be available in other contexts, could other teachers support a practice such as bringing in home toys to the classroom?

At the time of my study, the school was developing plans to expand to a new building and larger center on the east side of the university. The purpose of the project to develop larger connections between the university and the surrounding community. Much of the area surrounding the community is lower-income. The school developed
partnerships with local Head Start organizations and the city’s public school system to develop a center that will serve the whole community. There are plans to expand the center into the elementary and possibly middle and high school grades. The center will continue to be a site for research and the design of the center is being created so that students can observe from above the classrooms, similarly to medical students observing medical procedures, and not disrupt the classroom dynamics. Therefore, this new center will likely provide a rich context to continue to understand classroom life around a variety of topics while including a diverse group of children specifically by class.

*Doing research with children*

Doing research with children is important and valuable. Research that examines children’s perspectives and lives specifically is often overlooked or treated superficially. Here I reflect on my perspective of doing research with children.

Was I really a member of the peer culture group? Could I ever really truly be a member? While I did most of everything the children did, there were distinct differences that separated me from the group. I could come and go as I pleased. I was an adult. I did not have to abide by the rule of “not going on the stairs.” In fact, I always left on the stairs to use the restroom as the restroom in the classroom as child-sized.

Do I really understand the children’s perspective on superhero play? I think yes and no. The biggest challenge is that it is very difficult for young children to articulate what they are feeling, understanding, and believing. These are also changing everyday and can be very dependent on a multitude of other factors: parents, siblings, what they ate for breakfast, what they watched on TV, and what their peers think.
What if I were a male? The group that I became involved with was primarily male. I’ll never know, but I think our relationships would have been very different if I were a male. I think I would have become a member of the group much faster and I think the play would have involved more rough and tumble play. However, this may be due to my own limits and comfort about this type of play.

**Implications of this Study**

This study has implications for classroom practice and for future research. I discuss both in the following separate sections.

*Implications for Practice*

This ethnographic study represents the experiences of two primary teachers, supportive adults, and a classroom of children. Through the analysis of the school culture and peer culture contexts, this study provides a rich description of both the peer culture, school culture, and individual practices and perspectives related to superhero play. Teachers who are challenged by this type of play or want to understand more about superhero play may find the multiple perspective analysis useful. Alone, either perspective does not provide a complete picture of the complexity of superhero play. While superheroes was an interest of the peer culture, the school culture practices provided the support and context for this interest to be included and part of the children’s everyday lives at school.

Many children spend full days in child care and other early education and care experiences. Children bring their interests and perspective to these settings and teachers can find ways to understand and support these interests in the classroom, including the
curriculum as described in chapter 4. Play in many contexts is becoming more limited aligned with an emphasis on concepts of school readiness and standards. This study shows how the teachers are able to emphasize play throughout the day and align the children’s play to various curricular areas and standards, such as the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards.

**Implications for Future Research**

In this study, I examined one classroom situated in a laboratory school setting where I knew superhero play was supported in the classroom context. Similar studies of superhero play should examine classrooms in other settings including a diverse group of children, particularly around class as this classroom represented primarily middle to upper-middle class families. Other studies should also examine classroom contexts of teachers who do not support or more significantly limit superhero play, to understand the experiences of the teachers and children from a different perspective.

This study did not examine the perspectives of the families of the children in the classroom in relationship to superhero play. While I did have access to some of the parents due to my participation in the classroom, it was beyond the scope of this study to delve into their perspectives. However, this is an important area of study in relationship to superhero play to understand superhero play in another context, the home, to understand families’ views on superheroes, particularly related to the media and marketing as they are likely the primary consumers of many of the products the children brought or wore to school.
Listening to the Voices of Children

In this peer culture, the children’s interest in superheroes reflected much more than identification with powerful characters. The children were able to connect and affiliate as a group around a shared knowledge of superheroes. Alan was able to become a member through learning about superheroes through his peers. Thus, access to popular culture was not a determinate of membership in the group. The children were able to connect their interests in superheroes to the school culture in various ways, such as small group work, making books, and sharing superhero stories. Their interests were not only valued, but became a part of the school culture context.

Children need opportunities to explore their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. In early childhood, play, including superhero play, is a powerful and essential means for this to happen. We need to find ways for children to have a voice and for adults to listen and seek to understand their perspective.

Through making connections between the school culture and the peer culture, the teachers were able to connect with the children at a different level. This connection provided the teachers an opportunity to understand the children’s perspectives and as a result they could connect and adopt their own practices taking into account the children’s point of view. Examples include co-constructing limits on superhero play and figuring out how to use the saved signs in the classroom.

Andrea described the children’s discussion of popular culture in the classroom the same as adults “meeting at the water cooler” to discuss the television programs they watched the night before. I think this description helps make the connection of the
meanings of popular culture for some children. Children, like adults, are people trying to make connections with others. These connections are important to understand others, understand who they are in connection to others, and understand who they are as individuals. Our connections to others are like a mirror on who we are, who we want to be, and who we can become. Opportunities to “meet at the water cooler” provide opportunities to share knowledge, learn new information, share personal interests, make connections and express care for one another.
REFERENCES


Perry, B. D. (2003). Early childhood today talked with renowned expert and ECT author Dr. Bruce D. Perry about young children and the tumultuous times we live in [Electronic version]. *Early Childhood Today, 17*(6),


280


281


APPENDIX A

POSTED LETTER OF MY ROLE IN THE CLASSROOM
Jeanne Galbraith is a Ph.D. candidate in Integrated Teaching and Learning in the College of Education, completing her dissertation on superhero play. Her dissertation study is an ethnographic study to understand superhero play from multiple perspectives. An ethnographic study involves spending an extensive amount of time and participating within the context as a member. The multiple perspectives include: (1) Teachers’ perspectives - how they view, understand, support, and manage this type of play in the classroom (2) Theoretical perspectives – how different theoretical lenses inform us as researchers and teachers to the different meanings and implications of this type of play, and importantly (3) Children’s perspectives – what does the play mean to different children and together as a peer culture group. She is participating in the role of “student” to differentiate herself from the other adults (teachers). The purpose is to try to get deeper into the children’s peer culture world to understand more about what superhero play means from their perspective. Thus, she will not be engaging in “teacher” type roles such as discipline and guidance. Through this study, she hopes to gain a deeper understanding of superhero play to inform teachers, researchers, and families, and to give children a voice about what superhero play means from their perspective.
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORMS AND LETTERS
Dear __________________________,

I, Jeanne Galbraith, a doctoral student in Early Childhood Education at The Ohio State University, and my advisors Dr. David E. Fernie and Dr. Laurie Katz, would like your child to participate in a research study focusing on understanding superhero play in an early childhood classroom as part of my requirements for completion of a doctoral dissertation. We are interested in developing a greater understanding of the phenomenon of superhero play from multiple perspectives, especially the children’s perspective.

I, Jeanne Galbraith, will participate as a member of the classroom context to try to understand what superhero play means to the children from their perspective. To do this, I will participate and attempt to become a member of their peer culture group. I will not participate as a teacher in the classroom, however I will still take on typical adult roles such as tying shoes and maintaining safety if necessary.

I will observe and participate within the classroom context for a year, attending at least two to three days per week. I will take field notes on my observations. Additionally, I will conduct periodic interviews with children in small group contexts (2-5 children). The purpose of the interviews will be to understand the children’s perspective more in-depth as well as to check my observations with the children’s perspectives. The purpose of the interviews will be explained to the children, and they will be free to leave at any time or for any reason during the interviews.

Videotapes will be used periodically to supplement observations. Videotapes may be transcribed. The video cameras already set up in the classroom will be used so they will not be a distraction to the children. Additionally, small groups of children will occasionally participate in video revisiting sessions. The purpose of the session will be to play back a play scenario for the children and have them share their thoughts/feelings/perspectives on the situation. These will be carried out similarly to the interview sessions, and as such, the children will be free to leave at any time. The children will also be photographed occasionally during their play. The photographs will be shared with the children and/or teachers to understand their perspective on a given scenario. Additionally, the children will periodically be given the opportunity to take photographs of items/people/events that are important to them. This activity will be carefully planned and organized with the classroom teachers. Audiotapes will be used periodically to supplement observations as well as during all interview or video revisiting sessions. Audiotapes may also be transcribed. None of the information or data will be displayed over the Internet.

We have enclosed a consent form. Please feel free to address any concerns or questions to me, Jeanne Galbraith, at (614) 292-1044, David Fernie, at (614) 292-8023, or Laurie Katz at (614) 292-1257.

We sincerely appreciate your support in this project.
Dear __________________________,

I, Jeanne Galbraith, a doctoral student in Early Childhood Education at The Ohio State University, and my advisors Dr. David E. Fernie and Dr. Laurie Katz, would like you to participate in a research study focusing on understanding superhero play in an early childhood classroom as part of my requirements for completion of a doctoral dissertation. We are interested in developing a greater understanding of the phenomenon of superhero play from multiple perspectives, especially the children’s perspective.

I, Jeanne Galbraith, will participate as a member of the classroom context to try to understand what superhero play means to the children from their perspective. To do this, I will participate and attempt to become a member of their peer culture group. I will not participate as a teacher in the classroom, however I will still take on typical adult roles such as tying shoes and maintaining safety if necessary.

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We sincerely appreciate your support in this project.
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

I, _________________________, consent to participate in the research study: Multiple Perspectives on Superhero Play in an Early Childhood Classroom.

Dr. David Fernie, Principal Investigator, Laurie Katz, Co-Investigator, or the authorized representative, Jeanne Galbraith, has explained the purpose of the project, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my child’s participation through the attached letter. Possible benefits of the project have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I, or my child, are free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the project without prejudice to me, or my child.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read or had the form read to me and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me. If I have questions about my rights or my child’s rights as a research participant I can contact the Office of Research Risks Protection at (614) 688-4792.

- I consent to the use of photographs. I understand how photographs will be used for this study.
- I consent to the use of audiotapes. I understand how audiotapes will be used for this study.
- I consent to the use of videotapes. I understand how videotapes will be used for this study.
- I consent to my child’s participation in interviews that will be conducting with a small group of children. I understand how interviews will be used for this study.

Print Your Name: ______________________________________

Signed: _______________________ Date: ______________________
(Person authorized to consent for participant)

Signed: ______________________________
(Principal Investigator or his/her authorized representative)
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
March 5, 2005
Planned Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How do you define/describe superhero play?
   a. How do you define/describe power play?

2. Describe for me how you feel about superhero play.
3. How do you support superhero play in the classroom?
4. How does superhero play compare to other forms/types of dramatic play?
5. How do you talk about superhero play with the undergraduate/practicum students?
6. When you’re at conferences, what’s your impression about ECE perceptions of superhero play?
7. How do you talk about superhero play at these venues?
8. How do you feel superhero play is working in your classroom?
9. What are any challenges you’re having or you’ve had about superhero play?
10. How did the “rule” about no superhero play after circle arise? How do you feel it is working?
Sample Interview Questions for Children

1. Tell me about what you like to play

2. Who do you like to play with?

3. What do you and ___________________ play together?

4. Tell me about playing (with) superheroes.

5. Sometimes you bring toys from home such as ________________ superheroes such as Batman, Power Rangers to school. How come?

6. When can you use these toys from home?

7. How do you feel about this rule?

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about superheroes?
APPENDIX D

SAMPLE VIDEO REVISITING QUESTIONS
Sample Questions to ask Children in Video Revisiting

1. Why did you decide to play __________ (insert salient theme from the play episode)?

2. You were playing with __________ (insert peer(s) names). Why were you playing together? How did you decide to play together?

3. I noticed that in your play you were talking about superheroes, such as ______________________. Tell me more about the superhero(es) and why you used them in your play.

4. Tell me about this __________ (insert select part from the video that the researcher is interested in learning more about)

5. In your play you were using __________ (insert toy, product, likely connected to superheroes or an aspect of popular culture). Why were you using _____________________? Why was this important to your play?