The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School
College of Education

CHILDREN, IMAGINARY COMPANIONS, AND NARRATIVE SKILLS: TWO CASE STUDIES OF THE POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENTAL BENEFITS OF IMAGINARY COMPANION PLAY FOR THE NARRATIVE SKILLS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

A Dissertation in Curriculum and Instruction by

Suzanne E. Swartz

©2014 Suzanne E. Swartz

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2014
The dissertation of Suzanne E. Swartz was reviewed and approved by the following:

James E. Johnson
Professor of Education, PIC-ECE
Committee Chair and Advisor

Daniel Hade
Associate Professor of Education, LLED

Vivian Yenika-Agbaw
Professor of Education, LLED

Edgar Yoder
Professor of Education, AEE

Rosemary Zbiek
Professor of Education
Director of Graduate Program in Curriculum and Instruction

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
Abstract

Imaginary companion play is traditionally recognized as a childhood phenomenon and is associated with imagination and pretend play. As a sustained and complex form of role play, imaginary companion play becomes more detailed and abstract and functions as a highly complex mode of play expression in early childhood. Narrative, evident in children’s decontextualized language, is a complex form of linguistic expression in early childhood. Imaginary companion play and narrative both require sophisticated, symbolic mental and linguistic construction for creation and duration; both processes require similar decontextualization. This dissertation investigates the imaginary companion play and narrative skills of young children. Designed as an exploratory, qualitative study, this study is contextualized within the “play-literacy nexus” and utilizes multiple forms of narrative research. Two case studies were conducted with single child-participants and accompanying parent-participants. Parent-participants completed semi-structured interviews prior to the initiation of data collection sessions with child-participants. Through semi-structured interviews, narrative task productions, and artistic and dramatic task productions, child-participants shared their experiences of imaginary companion play and demonstrations of narrative skill development. Also collected were child-participants’ spontaneous narratives about their imaginary companions. Using analysis of narrative and assessment of narratives presented with a creative narrative writing stance, each child-participant’s central story yielded information that addressed or challenged
the following themes: the concept of imaginary companion play; the qualities of young children with imaginary companions; the connection between pretend play and narrative skills; and the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children. Child-participant and parent-participant interviews yielded striking profiles that aligned with themes of friendship, ownership, and imagination. Study results indicate the potential benefit of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children in areas: abstract thought processes like mental and linguistic constructions; and narrative skill advantages like sophisticated language use, story schema expertise, and psychological causation. Study results also yielded demonstrations of decontextualization in play and language. This study indicates a need for further research in the areas of: refined dynamic systems theory as a lens for analyzing pretend play and narrative development; and connections between imaginary companion play and potential child development.

Key Terms: decontextualized language, dynamic systems theory, imaginary companion play, narrative skill, play-literacy nexus.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures xii
Acknowledgements xiii
Dedication xiv

**Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION**

Background to the Study 1
Statement of Problem 3
  Theoretical State 3
  State of Reality 6
Purpose of the Study 8
Research Questions 10

**Chapter 2 THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Introduction 12
Defining Imaginary Companion Play 15
  Theoretical Basis 15
  Historical Overview of Research 18
Terms 28
Definitions 30
Population (Incidence; Age and Gender; Family Structure; Parental
  Reports; Cultural Differences) 32
Defining Features (Friendship; Ownership; and Imagination
  Imaginative Play, and the Fantasy/Reality Distinction) 40
Assessment of Narratives 141

Multiple Case Studies 145

Design of the Study 146

Selection of Participants 146

Research Setting 151

Child-participant(s) and Parent-participant(s) 151

Timeline 153

Data Collection

Interviews 154

Narrative Production Tasks 156

Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks 159

Observations 159

Data Analysis and Interpretation 160

Data Presentation 162

Chapter 4 CASE STUDY ONE: TORY

Preamble to the Case Studies 164

Introduction to Chapter Four 166

Meeting Tory 167

Background of Tory and her Parents 170

Sessions with Tory 172

Interviews and Conversations with Tory 175

Narrative Production Tasks #1-5 190
Artistic and Dramatic Productions 210

Conclusion 216

Chapter 5 CASE STUDY TWO: KYLEIGH

Introduction 217

Meeting Kyleigh 218

Background of Kyleigh and her Parents 220

Sessions with Kyleigh 222

Interviews and Conversations 225

Narrative Production Tasks #1-5 242

Artistic and Dramatic Productions 256

Conclusion 266

Chapter 6 ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS AND ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS 267

Introduction 267

Part 1: What is imaginary companion play? What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions? 269

Part 2: What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills? 306

Part 3: What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children? 311

Conclusion 343
Chapter 7 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS  344

Summary of Findings of the Study  344

Strengths and Limitations  348

Implications  352

Suggestions for Future Research  352

Conclusion  353

Works Cited  355

Appendices  388

Appendix A: The Narrative Assessment Profile  389

Appendix B: The Story Pyramid Framework  391

Appendix C: Recruitment  392
  Recruitment Flyer  393
  Recruitment Phone Script  395

Appendix D: Consent Forms  400
  Assent Form for Potential Child-Participant  401
  Informed Consent Form  404
  Informed Consent Form: Alternate Adult and Alternate Location Approval  409

Appendix E: Data Collection Interview Scripts  415
  Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview: Script for Parent-Participant  416
Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview: Script for Child-Participant 419

Appendix F: Data Collection Tasks 423

Narrative Production Tasks #1-5 424

Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks 429

Appendix G: Data Analysis: Assessment of Narratives 431

Deletion Guidelines and Procedures 432

C-Unit Segmenting Rules 433

Descriptions and Examples of Literate Language Features 434

The Story Pyramid Framework with Levels 435
List of Figures

Figure 1: Emily the Butterfly 211
Figure 2: Friends to Play with at School 212
Figure 3: I Think about Princesses 213
Figure 4: My Friend Allison 214
Figure 5: Baby Birds but not Didi 258
Figure 6: Nile, Didi, and Emily 260
Figure 7: The Place for Singing 262
Figure 8: My People Eat Pancakes at Pap’s 264
Acknowledgements

My gratitude and appreciation is extended to the following individuals for their contributions to this dissertation:

To Dr. James E. Johnson, my committee chair, thesis advisor, teacher, and friend: Thank you for your guidance and wisdom throughout my graduate program and my dissertation process. Your passionate dedication to children, families, students, and teachers is exemplary.

To Dr. Daniel Hade, Dr. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, and Dr. Edgar Yoder, the members of my dissertation committee: Thank you for your support and encouragement during my graduate classes, independent studies, and dissertation. Your investment in my work is an honor.

To my friends Carolyn Griess and Annette Searfoss: Thank you for the deep and dear conversations, the laughter, and the coffee.

To the participants of my study: Tory and Kyleigh: Thank you for sharing your imaginary companions and stories with me. You are talented, visionary storytellers.

And to my husband, Clifton C. Swartz: You are a more wonderful companion than I could ever have imagined. Alas, oh least despicable!
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children: Joshua, Frances, Nadine, Melissa, and Caleb; and to all the children who have been my students. You put the stories in my life and the life in my stories. I am forever grateful.
Chapter One

Introduction

Background of the Study

Imaginary companion play is traditionally recognized as a childhood phenomenon and is associated with imagination and pretend play. Referred to as play with imaginary companions, pretend companions, imaginary friends, or imaginary playmates, this type of pretend role play (Harris, 2000) occurs in as many as 65% of all childhoods (Singer & Singer, 1990). The popularity of imaginary companion play in childhood and adult entertainment culture is well known. Hobbes in Calvin and Hobbes, Jimmy Stewart’s white rabbit Harvey, and Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne are all examples of widely recognized imaginary companions.

Contemporary researchers approach imaginary companion play with inquiry in an intriguing, redefined, and re-emerging field. Parents and teachers view imaginary companion play with reactions ranging from surprise to indulgence and, sometimes, even extreme concern. Children themselves, the creators of their imaginary companions and the authors of their stories, seem to effortlessly produce these pretend identities which “... are expressions of children’s private experiences that are frequently observable yet relatively impervious to undue external influence from researchers” (Klausen & Passman,
As a sustained and complex form of role play, imaginary companion play becomes more detailed and abstract and is a highly complex form of play expression in early childhood.

Narrative, as seen by children’s decontextualized language, is a complex form of linguistic expression in early childhood. Established similarities between pretend play and narrative include: form, composition, two distinct forms of symbolic thought, (see also Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and contextualizing pretend play and narrative in a continuum of narrative activities (Nicolopoulou, 2002; 2007). Because imaginary companion play and narrative both require complex, symbolic mental and linguistic construction for creation and duration, it is therefore reasonable to expect that both imaginary companion play and narrative require decontextualization. The theoretical expectation for similar decontextualization demonstrates a strong connection between pretend play and narrative skills for young children.

The contemporary understanding of imaginary companion play includes recognizing important developmental benefits for children who engage in imaginary companion play (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002; Gleason, Seban, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Current research of imaginary companion play and narrative skills (Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and narrative skill and school success (Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010) have initiated a promising area of inquiry for imaginary companion play and the potential developmental benefits for the narrative skills of young children. The potential developmental benefits of
imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills may therefore contribute to improved reading performance and better school outcomes like academic success. Therefore, I recognize and will respond to the need for further research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating children’s narrative skills.

The opportunity for study is therefore unique. I believe that imaginary companion play represents a convergence of imagination, ownership, and friendship; whether secret or shared, imaginary companion play offers a compelling peek into the world of childhood. Further, I anticipate that the study of imaginary companion play may provide a better understanding of the private lives of children, diverse modes of development, and the reciprocal connection to specific narrative skill development.

Statement of the Problem

Theoretical State

Historically, the role of play in the cognitive development of young children is based on sound developmental theory. The eminent Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) created his theory of cognitive development drawn from direct observations of his three young children. Often journaling on the play actions of his children, Piaget concluded that all knowledge is a direct product of action. His children’s interactions with their immediate physical environment led Piaget to note this mode of action as the central manner in which young children acquire knowledge. Thus, Piaget
believed it was play itself which provided unlimited opportunities for children to interact with the environment and its components to construct knowledge (Piaget, 1962).

During the same era as Piaget, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian theorist of psychology, was focusing on the sociocultural influences of cognitive development. Also an ardent observer of his young children, Vygotsky noted how young children’s social interactions with friends, siblings, parents, and teachers encouraged cognitive development. Acclaimed for describing the “zone of proximal development” in which the child can accomplish challenging tasks with the assistance of a more competent other through scaffolding, Vygotsky cited play as the source for cognitive development (1976; Original publication, 1933).

Piaget and Vygotsky are recognized as foundational theorists of the cognitive development movement throughout the 20th century. Although they differed on subjects such as the function of pretend play, both Piaget and Vygotsky were convinced of the importance of play in the cognitive development of young children. Strong traditions of empirical research, educational practice, and an expectation for learning through play have been influenced by the works of Piaget and Vygotsky.

During the 20th and early 21st century, the emphasis on cognitive development in early childhood contexts was generally balanced with respect for the usefulness of play (Wenner, 2009), despite the “ambiguities” of play (Sutton-Smith, 2001b) and the difficulties associated with proving scientific proof of the
value of play (Pellegrini, 2011; Smith 2010; Sutton-Smith 1995). Much of the research and scholarship of the past decades has investigated how play offers opportunities for children to develop pre-literacy and literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010).

Recently, early literacy has become the focus of government inquiry, educational program development, and media scrutiny. The standards movement is generally associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) which led to standards, assessments, and federal funding established at a national level to be administered at the state level. The early intervention movement focused recognition on achievement gaps and academic deficits and generated early intervention efforts like the Early Reading First (2001). Due to resulting “scientifically based reading research” (SBRR), (Christie, 2008; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; see also Roskos & Christie, 2011) and a fervent pressure for accountability, our nation’s current standards for excellent early literacy instruction have altered early childhood education.

Academic standards for young children’s schooling are now set at the national and state levels. For example, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified the skills and concepts young children need to learn to succeed as readers and writers and the instructional practices that enhance early-literacy learning. Such standards require assessments which have resulted in increased use of standardized assessments at the preschool level. Standards and assessment emphasis have resulted in a strong focus on early school readiness
(Christie & Roskos, 2006), an increase in testing among preschool children, and a reduction of play in early childhood settings (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Despite decades of research that confirms the importance and benefits of play:

Early childhood teachers have been informed that they must get children ready for school by preparing them to read and write. In response to this pressure, many early childhood teachers have shortened the time allotted to free play and have increased the time spent in didactic teaching. (Segal, 2004, p.33)

Standards, assessment, and outcomes-driven instruction are marginalizing or eliminating play in many early childhood classrooms. I believe that the conceptual understanding, theoretical base, and practical implementation of the play-literacy balance have been seriously disrupted. As Roskos and Christie (2011) suggest, re-establishing the play-literacy balance will require original scholarship and compelling research in early childhood play and literacy to navigate the complex theoretical state in early childhood education as it exists in the United States.

**State of Reality**

Despite NCLB (2001) national educational reform, specific standards set by the National Early Literacy Panel (2008), and well-funded early intervention efforts like Early Reading First (2001), the National Assessment of Educational Progress 2009 report offers dismal results. For children near the close of the
early childhood years, the average reading score for 4th graders in 2009 was not significantly different from the score in 2007; this includes: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian /Pacific Islanders, Family Income (by National School Lunch Program), and English Language Learners. While the percentage of 4th graders in the nation performing at Proficient or above Proficient in reading increased from 29% in 1992 to 33% in 2009, the resulting message remains profound: two-thirds of 4th graders in the United States still perform below Proficient in reading. Recent results from the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate no improvement over the 2009 findings at the 4th grade level. These results point to the importance for researching and understanding how young children learn to read while encouraging researchers and scholars to examine the interwoven roles of play and literacy in young children’s development.

Researchers agree that children’s narrative skills comprise an important component of reading success (Hicks, 1991; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaugency, 2010), and sound language and literacy skills are essential in our contemporary information-based culture and economy (Snow & Van Hemel, 2008). Beginning in early childhood:

Preschool children are in the process of developing oral narrative skills, a critical prerequisite for literacy. In early elementary school years, personal narrative is a frequent writing assignment ... as well as a bridge to stories read in school. Throughout the life span, personal narratives are
necessary in communicating with people in the medical profession ... and the legal profession ... among many other uses, including some on a daily basis. Furthermore, personal narratives, unlike other genres, are integral to all cultures and ages studied to date. (McCabe & Bliss, 2003, p.6)

Narrative skills are identified the "gateway to reading and writing" (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, Newcomb, & de Villiers, 2005, p.6), and creating and sustaining a narrative requires a child to produce a decontextualized description of events (Currenton & Lucas, 2007).

Recent research reports that young children who participate in imaginary companion play demonstrate stronger narrative skills than children who do not participate in imaginary companion play (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that children who participate in imaginary companion play will develop into strong readers during their formal primary school experience. The potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills may therefore contribute to improved reading performance and better school outcomes like academic success.

**Purpose of the Study**

My study responds to the crucial need for research topics which connect play and literacy and contribute to a better understanding of the play-literacy concept applicable to early childhood education. Centered upon the role of play in the development of cognitive-linguistic skills contributing to literacy, my research study will contribute to the knowledge of both play and literacy to
better describe the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary
companion play and the possible role of imaginary companion play in the
development of young children’s narrative skills. By contextualizing my study
within the “play-literacy nexus,” the narrative skills of young children with
imaginary companions can be investigated within the “... space where
(children’s) play, language, and emerging literacy behaviors converge and
interact” (Roskos & Christie, 2011, p.204). To function theoretically within the
context of Roskos and Christie’s (2011) “play-literacy nexus,” I believe a well
aligned hypothesis viewing play and narrative as closely interwoven is
appropriate. Nicolopoulou (2007) proposed an:

... approach to understanding the developmental relationship between
pretend play and storytelling (that) treats them as initially parallel and
complementary modes of children’s narrative activity, with at least partly
distinct origins and developmental pathways, that young children are
gradually able to integrate effectively. Children’s play and narrative should
not be artificially separated or studied in mutual isolation, but should be
viewed as closely intertwined, and often overlapping, forms of socially
situated symbolic action. (p.268)

Nicolopoulou’s (2007) hypothesis is a solid base upon which to study the
reciprocal, dynamic nature of children’s imaginary companion play and narrative
skills while respecting the theoretical connection set forth in Roskos and
Christie’s “play-literacy nexus.”
Currently, play theorists identify imaginary companion play as a sustained and complex type of role play (Harris, 2000). Over time, imaginary companion play may become richly detailed, more abstract, and highly complex (Bouldin, 2006; Singer & Singer, 1990; Spitz, 2006; Taylor, 1999). Imaginary companion play is conceptualized as perhaps the most complex expression of play in early childhood (Klaussen & Passman, 2007; Triofi & Reese, 2009). Likewise, theorists and scholars identify narrative, specifically decontextualized language, as one of the richest and most highly detailed linguistic expressions in early childhood (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Snow, 1983). The central purpose of my investigation is to extend existing research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating children’s narrative skills. This study will allow the occurrence of children’s imaginary companion play, narrative behaviors, and narrative productions of young children to be observed, recorded, and assessed.

The goals of this study are: to extend prior research dealing with imaginary companion play; to explore potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills; and extend prior research of the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play.

**Research Questions**

Research questions include:

- What is imaginary companion play?
• What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?
• What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills?
• What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children?
Chapter Two
Theoretical and Research Context of the Study

Introduction

Imaginary companion play is recognized as a childhood phenomenon and is associated with imagination and pretend play. Referred to as play with imaginary companions, pretend companions, imaginary friends, or imaginary playmates, this type of pretend role play (Harris, 2000) occurs in as many as 65% of all childhoods (Singer, 1981). The popularity of imaginary companion play in childhood and adult entertainment culture is well known. Hobbes from the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, Jimmy Stewart’s rabbit Harvey, and A. A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh are all famous imaginary companions of the literary and media world. The aura of psychopathology largely associated with imaginary companion play during the last century has been replaced not only with acceptance and credibility but also with possibility and trendiness.

While imaginary companion play has historically been associated with psychopathology, social and emotional development, and most recently with cognitive skill development:

A potentially unique contribution of pretend companions to understanding children’s (and adults”) behaviors is that they are naturally emitted by
children. Thus, they are expressions of children’s private experiences that are frequently observable yet relatively impervious to undue external influence from researchers. (Klausen & Passman, 2007, p. 350)

I believe that imaginary companion play represents a convergence of imagination, ownership, and friendship; whether secret or shared, imaginary companion play offers a compelling peek into world of childhood. Further, my study of imaginary companion play will provide a better understanding of the private lives of children, diverse modes of development, and the reciprocal connection to specific narrative skill development.

Within my review of literature, the following questions are addressed:

- What is imaginary companion play?
- What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?
- What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills?
- What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children?
- Which perspectives and theoretical frameworks could be adopted to assess the narratives of young children who participate in imaginary companion play?

To conduct my review of research literature addressing the above questions, I have purposely chosen to employ a critical analysis approach. The critical analysis approach views research reports as written texts to be unpacked through the action of critical reading (Jupp, 1996). Rather than a more
traditional and typical evaluation of studies, I shifted my emphasis away from research design in order to focus on analyzing the definitions and conceptual explanations of a largely undefined field. It is not my intention to avoid discussions of research design, measures of validity, or statistical results; in some instances, I have offered such meta-analysis as critical points. However, it is my intention to gather and offer a critical reading of the body of scholarly knowledge regarding children’s imaginary companion play, developmental benefits, and related narrative skills in an effort to establish a productive conceptual base. By analyzing the definitions, explanations, and connections already put forth as scholarly conceptualizations, my own critical reading and analysis will reveal critical and informative points which stand out as indicators for future research within the “play-literacy nexus” (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

Following my discussion of the theoretical basis for imaginary companion play, I then conduct an historical overview of the research dealing with imaginary companion play. Terms, definitions, population, cultural differences, and defining features are presented. The qualities and differences of young children who participate in imaginary companion play are analyzed within my adaptation of Seiffge-Krenke’s (2001) hypotheses. My discussion of the imaginary companion play- narrative skills connection includes both traditional and contemporary theories. Later, this discussion becomes basis of the framework for my study. The explanation of the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children includes the following sub-topics:
narrative development, language skills, abstract thought processes, and narrative skill advantages. My review of literature concludes with a consideration of the traditional and contemporary frameworks and approaches for assessing the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play.

It is my intent to provide a clear interpretation of: the literature regarding imaginary companion play; the qualities and differences of young children with imaginary companions; the connection between pretend play and narrative skills; the developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children; and the frameworks and approaches which could be adopted for the assessment of young children’s narratives. By assessing the research literature clearly and honestly, I describe and inform researchers of the intriguing subject of imaginary companion play and the narrative skills of young children.

**Defining imaginary companion play**

**Theoretical Basis**

Early researchers attributed most instances of imaginary companion play to psychopathological characteristics or deviant behaviors (Ames & Learned, 1946; Bender & Vogel, 1941; Burnham, 1892), excess emotional energy, or a method of manipulation and wish fulfillment (Green, 1922; Hall, 1914; Munroe, 1894). During this time period, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget documented his children’s episodes of play, including imaginary companion play; Piaget’s research interest in the development and progression of young children’s intellectual development led to his theoretical contribution to the study of
imaginary companion play as early as 1926 (Piaget, 1955, 1962; see also Klausen & Passman, 2007). Piaget pioneered research in children’s developmental cognitive transitions as advancement through distinct stages: sensimotor, preoperational, and concrete operational.

Imaginary companion play, with recognition of the imaginary companion as a separate other who served possible positive functions, easily aligned within Piaget’s developmental framework. Classified in the preoperational stage, imaginary companion play demonstrated the developmental transition from self-talk to social speech, and so Piaget attributed children’s conversations with imaginary companions as essentially inner speech or self-talk (also egocentric speech). As children’s conversations with their imaginary companions progressed from inner to outward directionality, their conversations would emerge as social speech. Piaget’s initiative in utilizing imaginary companion play to unpack the complexity of stages in children’s language development has endured; contemporary scholarly work has developed a framework which is based upon Piaget’s theories (Watkins, 2000).

Piaget’s descriptions of his daughter Jacqueline’s imaginary companions – animals, dwarfs, and invisible children – are endearing and delightful. His inclusion of imaginary companion play within his developmental framework served to normalize this childhood phenomenon. However, Piaget expressed a rather negative view of imaginary companion play as a manifestation of children’s immature thought and interpreted this type of play as a fragmented
jumble of imitation and assimilation. Certain that both pretend play and
egocentric speech would disappear in the course of normal cognitive
development, Piaget nevertheless identified imaginary companions as intriguing
purposeful constructions, although he did not assign the creation of imaginary
companions to children’s creativity or imagination. Indeed, Piaget (1962) issued
a most resounding statement often associated with his negative interpretation of
imaginary companion play as immature thought when he wrote, “In reality, the
child has no imagination, and what we ascribe to him as such is no more than a
lack of coherence” (p. 131). Ultimately, Piaget believed that pretend play was
suppressed as children progressed to the concrete operational stage of
development and more mature levels of logic. Despite Piaget’s essentially
negative interpretation, his recognition normalized imaginary companion play
and established a basic theoretical framework for studying imaginary companion
play and transitional stages in language development (Watkins, 2000) and
imaginary companion play and the psych of young children (Hurlock & Burstein,
1932; Nagera, 1969; Wickes, 1927).

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed a more positive perspective
of young children’s pretend play than did his contemporary Jean Piaget.
Vygotsky classified pretend play as a sophisticated, primary mode of cognitive
activity for young children during which alternatives to reality are created (1986).
Vygotsky, as opposed to Piaget, believed that the capacity for creating
alternatives to reality, which reflects a certain pre-existing knowledge of reality,
was not suppressed as children transitioned toward cognitive maturity. In a critique of Piaget, Vygostsky (1986) wrote that the capacities for pretend play and egocentric speech are progressive in the cognitive functioning over the childhood-through-adulthood lifespan.

Contemporary theorists, like Harris (2007), have adopted Vygotsky’s more positive concept of pretend play. Harris identified three primary reasons for aligning his own theoretical explanations with Vygotsky: pretend play is distinctly human and universal; the lack of pretend play is associated with pathology; the ability to imagine is necessary for cognitive processes. Cognitive processes which require the ability to engage in pretense include reasoning from unfamiliar premises, judgments, and testimony-based learning (p. 208-209). Contextualizing pretend or imaginative play, like imaginary companion play, within the span of human life, Harris wrote:

... the imagination is not especially characteristic of early childhood. It is a capacity that contributes to cognitive development and to normal adult functioning. Although it is true that pretend play declines, this particular type of imaginative activity can be seen as just one early manifestation of a wide-ranging and sustained capacity. (p. 205)

**Historical Overview of Research**

Imaginary companion play with pretend friends is a historically recognized phenomenon of childhood and represents what is often considered to be the most creative act of the imagination (Klausen & Passman, 2007) – making
someone out of nothing (Partington & Grant, 1984). As interesting as the investigation of imaginary companion play may be, little research has been conducted until the recent decades. Begun in the late 1800’s, research grew sporadically or stalled throughout the next century. Finally attracting attention and blossoming in the 1990’s, research on imaginary companion play has gained credibility and is recognized for its potential for sophisticated study and contribution to the lives, play, and skills of young children.

Developments which span wide categories of theory and research exist in literature on imaginary companion play. Taylor (1999) provided a comprehensive summary of specific study results in her landmark publication *Imaginary companions and the children who create them*. Klausen and Passman (2007) completed a history of research as a contextual and developmental basis for understanding pretend companions and their related topics of interest. While imaginary companion play is currently contextualized within an expansive frame of pretend play, a retrospective overview of the historical progression and differing contexts of research is beneficial for understanding the progress of the field and determining its future.

Klausen and Passman (2007) listed six successive stages of broad historical development concerning the field of research in imaginary companion play:

1. Early history
2. Early theory
Early literature and research studies which captured and portrayed imaginary companion play are limited; I think the limited scope of early research...
is likely related to the cultural-historical perspective that did not view childhood as distinct from adulthood. The concept of childhood is generally recognized as emerging after the 17th century; not until the 19th century was childhood seen as different from adulthood and therefore distinguished by specific functions like early learning and play (Kellett, Robinson, & Burr, 2004). Early published perspectives of imaginary companion play, including empirical research, followed the recognition of childhood as a distinct stage of life.

The birth of significant (according to contemporary standards) empirical research on imaginary companion play can be traced to the late 19th century (Munroe, 1893; Vostrovsky, 1894). Of these, I think Vostrovsky’s collection of stories and reports of children with imaginary companions represents sincere intention in the collection of qualitative data, but Vostrovsky included 39 girls and only 7 boys in her study sample. Therefore, I recognize that Vostrovsky’s quantitative data could be described as weak, and some researchers label her work as non-standardized or “pseudo-empirical” (Klausen & Passman, 2007; also see Taylor, 1999). Still, the scholarly work of Munroe and Vostrovsky is recognized as the founding of empirical research in imaginary companion play.

Earliest concepts of imaginary companions were often classified as spirits or supernatural entities and treated accordingly. Harvey (1914, 1918) identified children’s imaginary companion play as psychopathological and noted parents’ interpretations of imaginary companion play as evidence of spiritual bondage or demonic possession requiring intervention or exorcism. Following this earliest
period of research, more theoretical research of imaginary companion play heralded the new notion of childhood as a distinct stage of life; likewise, theorists recognized imaginary companions as separate entities which originated in children’s imaginations (Munroe, 1894; Vostrovsky, 1894). I believe that the recognition of imaginary companions as separate others which originated in children’s imaginations, and not as a result of demonic possession, was a beneficial by-product of the newly emerging field of developmental psychology. Hall (1914), considered to be the founder of developmental psychology, connected the creation of imaginary companions with children’s withdrawal from external to internal attention.

Emphasizing the need and desire for socialization, Cooley (1922) dedicated early work to the social nature of children (See also, Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; and Klausen & Passman, 2007). While developing intelligence testing and working with gifted children, Terman (1926) reported that gifted and creative children were more inclined to participate in imaginary companion play. Included in Norsworthy and Whitley’s (1933) textbook for teacher education, children’s creations of imaginary companions were identified more with intense imagination, rather than an inability to differentiate between pretense and reality. These early theoretical works created the context for investigating children’s wide-ranging abilities connected with imagination and imaginary companion play.
Within the burgeoning invitation for approaching children’s development within a psychological framework, Piaget (1955) entered the discussion of imaginary companion play during the late 1920’s. Theoretically contextualized within his explanation of young children’s developmental transition from self-talk to social speech, Piaget identified imaginary companion play as a normal childhood phenomenon and set the stage for the use of imaginary companion play to dismantle the transitional progression and stages of childhood language development and related later theoretical frameworks (see Watkins, 2000).

During the decade that Piaget was advancing cognitive development as a theory, Wickes (1927) was pioneering the advancement of children’s thought by examining the manner in which children used imaginary companion play to balance internal and external forces and their reciprocal manifestation in imaginary companion play. The work of Wickes is considered to be a seminal contribution to the legitimacy of research in imaginary companion play and the nature and functions of the young child’s psyche (see also Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Nagera, 1969).

More sophisticated empirical efforts emerged in the early 1930’s (Griffiths, 1935; Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Svendsen, 1934). Establishing the foundational definition of imaginary companion play, Svendsen’s study specified the best operational description of imaginary companion play to date. Her endearing definition of an imaginary companion in *Children’s Imaginary Companions* endures to this day as:
... an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child, but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment. (1934, p. 988)

Svendsen’s study established central topics of investigation which continue today and include: incidence rates, intelligence rating, and personality correlates.

**Historical Overview of Research: Midcentury Lull**

From the time of Svendsen’s foundational study (1934) until the early 1990’s, several studies contributed to the study of imaginary companion play utilizing Svendsen’s definition and implementing her main areas of inquiry (Ames & Learned, 1946; Bender & Vogel, 1941), but significant research efforts lagged until the 1970’s. Some authors regard the mismatch of imaginary companion play to the popular approaches in psychology, like behaviorism, as the contributing element during the mid-century lull (Klausen & Passman, 2007), but I believe it is just as likely that the direct effects of the Great Depression, World War II, and lack of empirical introspection prevalent during the 1950’s contributed to the drop in empirical studies of imaginary companion play.

Collecting data during the 1960’s and 1970’s, Newson and Newson (1968, 1976) produced a significant longitudinal study of 700 four-year-olds with imaginary companion play as a secondary focus. Because imaginary companion play was
not the central focus, I approach Newson and Newson’s data as limited in establishing correlations with imaginary companion play; still, this was the first longitudinal study in which imaginary companion play was included and so established the importance of longitudinal approaches in the field.

**Historical Overview of Research: A Significant Field**

Several topics of early research were revisited during the last two decades of the 20th century, and these central foci have formed the basis of the emerging, contemporary field of imaginary companion research. Children’s distinction between pretense and reality (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002) and children’s developing theory of mind (Taylor & Carlson, 1997) build on the work of Norsworthy and Whitley (1933) and Wickes (1927). Somers and Yawkey (1984) presented a discussion of children’s intelligence and creative abilities as contextualized within imaginary companion play. Singer and Singer’s research investigating children’s imagination (see Singer, 1981; Singer & Singer 1990, 2001) further normalized the childhood phenomena of imaginary companion play begun by Piaget (1926). Taylor (Taylor, 1999) and Taylor and research associates (Taylor & Carlson, 1997, 2000; Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993) have focused specifically on the many ways in which children’s imaginations and imaginary companions are correlated. Research on adolescent populations and forms of imaginary companion play (Hoff, 2005; Seiffge-Krenke, 2001) has extended the traditional age parameters beyond the historical early childhood limits. Cross-cultural issues (Mills, 2003; Mathur & Smith, 2007), differing
attitudes (Allison, 2000; Carlson et al., 1998; Taylor & Carlson, 2002), and characteristics of children who create imaginary companions (Gleason et al., 2003; Pearson et al., 2001) are recent research topics that highlight the distinctions between children who do and those who do not create imaginary companions. Recent research on differences and similarities (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Harter & Chao, 1992; Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004) of children in regard to imaginary companion play once again moves the theory focus from imaginary companion play as normative (Piaget, 1926, 1955; Singer, 1981: Singer & Singer, 1990) to imaginary companion play as a distinct phenomenon.

Historical Overview of Research: Imaginary Companions, Reciprocal Topics, and Future Research

As the historical field of imaginary companion play is considered as the foundation for future empirical design and deliberation, it is clear that factors in recent studies have aided the establishment of credibility.

Taylor et al. (1993) explored diverse instruments and methodologies for the study of imaginary companion play and firmly demonstrated the reliability of laboratory-based contexts for conducting research with children and their imaginary companions (See also Klausen & Passman, 2007). Methodology and reliability were also tested concerning child and parent reporting in laboratory settings (Gleason, 2004a). Online reporting has recently been utilized as a primary tool (Ball, 2003). Both laboratory and online research can increase
accuracy by the adoption of a standard definition of imaginary companion play (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Klausen & Passman, 2007). I interpret the scholarly work of these authors (Ball, 2003; Gleason 2004a; Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor 1993, 1999) with utmost respect, as their efforts have been conducted with sophisticated methodologies and well-developed instruments and protocols that have added scientific credibility to the field of study of imaginary companion play.

Rich studies of interest produced during the past decade(s) include: creativity (Hoff, 2005); fantasy (Bouldin, 2006); functions of imaginary companions over time (Hoff, 2004); gender (Carlson & Taylor, 2005); identity (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004); imagination (Singer & Singer, 2001); intelligence (Harter & Chao, 1992); personality (Gleason, Jarudi, & Cheek, 2003); psychopathology (Fernyhough, Bland, Meins, & Coltheart, 2007); reality-pretense understanding (Bouldin, 2006; Taylor & Mottweiler, 2008); social development and provisions (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002; Gleason, 2002, 2004b; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006); academic-related skills development (Roby & Kidd, 2008; Trionfi & Reese, 2009); and theory of mind (Taylor & Carlson, 2004). These issues represent potential over-lapping complexity and deserve further study.

In consideration of the potential over-lapping complexity of imaginary companion play and numerous issues of investigation, the examination of imaginary companion play as it is embedded within other contexts holds interest
for me as a researcher. Bi-directional studies (see Klausen & Passman, 2007) or reciprocal studies might investigate correlational relationships between imaginary companion play and other issues; in addition, such studies also suggest the possibility for investigating causal relationships in imaginary companion play. Specifically, I have oriented my research of children’s narrative skills within the context of children’s imaginary companion play.

In the current world of childhood and education, the disappearance of play (Nicolopoulou, 2010) and increased assessment demands drive the lives of young children (see No Child Left Behind, 2000). Play is misunderstood and compromised. My study will help develop a better understanding of play including targeted, precise research on imaginary companion play.

**Terms**

Foundational reports in literature concerning imaginary companion play refer to the pretend other as an *imaginary companion* (Svendsen, 1934; Singer & Singer, 1990). An early alternative to the term imaginary companion was *imaginary playmate* (Hurlock & Burnstein, 1932; Kirkpatrick, 1929; Vostrovsky, 1890). Partington and Grant (1984) “… prefer the label *imaginary playmate*. We feel that if play can be defined as transformation … then the product of the most ultimate transformation, i.e. creating *someone* out of nothing, should at least be semantically linked to the term play” (p. 218).

It appears that pretense itself has driven the quest for operational terms in imaginary companion play. Harris (2000), in his discussion of pretense and
pretend play, distinguished between three modes of pretend play according to the supposed vehicle of pretense: a *personified object* is directed toward an external object; a *pretend identity* is directed toward the child himself; an *imaginary companion* is a product of the imagination and lacks an objective basis (see also Klausen & Passman, 2007). By this operational definition, Harris (2000) opened the door for the combination of pretend identities and imaginary companions within theory and empirical research studies (Bouldin, 2006; Klausen & Passman, 2005; Taylor & Carlson, 1997, 2005). Klausen and Passman (2007) suggested incorporating pretend identities and imaginary worlds along with other imaginative behavior like imaginary companion play, but while this suggestion may be a new direction for empirical research, it is an established operational definition for authors of children’s literature (see Milne, 1924, 1975; Spitz, 2006; Wullschlager, 1995).

A recent review of research literature concerning imaginary companion play encourages more deliberate terms *imaginary companion* (invisible and impersonated pretend companion), *personified object* (object given a personality), and *pretend companion* (includes both imaginary companion and personified object) (Klausen & Passman, 2005, 2007). Generally, contemporary researchers recognize and employ the term *imaginary companion* as most appropriate and operational (Fernyhough, 2007; Roby & Kidd, 2008; Taylor & Mottweiller, 2008; Trionfi & Reese, 2009).
Definition of Imaginary Companion Play

The earliest clinical definition of imaginary companion play was written by Burnham (1892) who wrote:

... imaginative children not only have imaginary playmates, and personate animals and men, sometimes doing grotesque or outlandish things for the sake of playing their roles, but they almost reconstruct ideally the world in which they live. Beasts, birds, and their food and furniture talk to them ... they have play brothers and sisters and dear friends with whom they talk ... Even the prosiest things are vivified. (p. 212, cited in Ames & Learned, 1946)

Forty years later the most accepted definition of imaginary companion play was established that identifies imaginary companion play as repeated play with an invisible other (Svendsen, 1934). In *Children’s Imaginary Companions*, Svendsen defined the term imaginary companion as implying:

... an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child, but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment. (1934, p. 988)

Singer and Singer (1990) extended the parameters of imaginary companion play to include play with personified objects, such as toys and stuffed
animals. Identifying features common to both imaginary companions and playthings, Singer and Singer recognized that play with a teddy bear or similar toy may initiate a transition to imaginary companion play; through this transition palpable objects can become imaginary companions. Examples such as Winnie the Pooh (Milne, 1924) and Hobbes from the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* are recognizable as personified objects.

Taylor further expanded the definition of imaginary companion play to include impersonation; to avoid confusion with typical role play, Taylor (1999) specified, “The completeness of the identification and the persistence with which the impersonated identity is maintained distinguishes impersonation from common role playing” (p. 15). A variation of the definition of imaginary companion play which offered parents the option to include or exclude characters and objects was defined by Bouldin and Pratt (1999) as “… a very vivid imaginary character that does not actually exist but is treated as real by the child, who plays with it and refers to it in conversation throughout the day” (p. 400).

Thus, the definition of imaginary companion play has evolved from simply play with an invisible other to include play with personified objects and impersonation. However, a specific operational definition is not explicitly followed by researchers. Klausen & Passman (2005) have noted that the shifting parameters concerning the inclusion of personified objects have produced confusing results which complicate comparing studies. The accepted
The contemporary definition of imaginary companion play identifies repeated play with an invisible other which may include an invisible character, personified objects such as toys and stuffed animals, or impersonation.

**Population: Incidence**

The number of children who engage in imaginary companion play is dependent upon a researcher’s definition. When restricting the definition of imaginary companions to play with an imaginary other, Newson and Newson (1968) reported a low population of about 20% engaging in imaginary companion play. Interviewing 3- to 4-year-old children and using Svenden’s restricted definition, Taylor and Carlson (1997) reported a 28% population participation in imaginary companion play.

Expanding criteria for imaginary companion play to include toys and stuffed animals, an early study (Harvey, 1918) estimated that only 6% of children create imaginary companions; the high end range was reported by Singer and Singer (1990) who identified that 65% of all children participate in imaginary companion play. Using the same expanded definition of imaginary companion play, Taylor and Carlson (1999) considered study cases of imaginary companions in children up to the age of 7 and found that 63% of children created imaginary companions; when including only invisible friends a 43% population was found. In a study addressing the question of whether or not children actually understand that their imaginary companions are pretend or real, Taylor and Mottweiller (2008) found that in study cases of imaginary companions...
created by children up to the age of 7 about 65% of children report imaginary companion play; when only invisible friends are included and toys are excluded, the incidence drops to 37%.

A recent longitudinal study (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004) presented intriguing information concerning imaginary companion play over the course of early and middle childhood. Children at ages three and four were interviewed about their imaginary companion play; the same children were re-interviewed at ages six and seven. With Taylor’s (1999) expanded definition as criteria, 31% of 6- and 7-year-olds were reported as participating in imaginary companion play; nearly 65% of children participating in the study described engaging in imaginary companion play across study participation years.

**Population: Age and Gender**

Children as young as two and three can create imaginary companions (Kirkpatrick, 1929; Svendsen, 1934; Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 1999), and most researchers identify the traditional period of imaginary companion play as occurring from 2 ½ to five or six years of age (Bates, 1946; Hoff, 2005; Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 1999).

The traditional view of childhood years spent with an imaginary companion usually recognized that children enter school and subsequently lose their imaginary companions (Newson & Newson, 1976). However, several studies disclose that children aged six and seven (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004) and as old as ten or eleven participate in imaginary companion
play (Bates, 1946; Hurlock & Burstein, 1932). Hoff (2005) investigated imaginary companion play in middle childhood and discovered that 52% of 4th grade children reported having an imaginary companion, while other studies indicated that imaginary companion play is reported well into adolescence (Seiffge-Krenke, 2001, in Fernyhough, Bland, Meins, & Coltheart, 2007; Taylor, Hurlette, & Dishion, 2010). A recent large scale study (Pearson, House, Doswell, Ainsworth, Dawson, & Simms, 2001) reported 28% of 5- to 9-year-olds and 9% of 12-year-olds had a current imaginary companion. An expanded perspective of imaginary companion play as an activity embedded within the full human lifespan, rather than a childhood phenomenon, has encouraged researchers to investigate adult imaginary companion play phenomenon as related to adaptive therapy for delusional behavior (Von Broembsen, 1986), adult dissociative identity disorder (Allison, 1998), and creativity in adult fiction writers (Taylor & Mannering, 2007).

Regarding gender, traditionally more preschool girls than boys create imaginary companions (Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Manosevitz, Prentice, & Wilson, 1973; Taylor, 1999; Vostrovsky, 1895), but Taylor (1999) discovered that the gender difference was reduced when children up to the age of seven were included. In fact, by school age, both girls and boys are equally likely to create imaginary companions (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004; Taylor & Manning, 2006). The type of imaginary companion created by children is correlated with the gender of the child. Usually, children create imaginary companions who are close to the same age and of the same sex as themselves.
While girls create imaginary companions who are separate entities and function as friends or dependents, boys are more likely to impersonate imaginary characters rather than viewing their imaginary companions as separate others (Carlson, 2005; Taylor, 1999).

**Population: Family Structure and the Appearance of an Imaginary Companion**

The appearance of an imaginary companion in the life of the first-born child often occurs preceding or following the birth of a second child (Klein, 1985; Manosevitz et al., 1973), which may signify the creation of an imaginary companion as a coping mechanism. First-born and only children (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Manosevitz, et al., 1973) and children with moderately to widely spaced siblings are likely to create imaginary companions (Svendsen, 1934; Taylor, 1999), although some early research showed that only children were equally or only slightly more likely to create imaginary companions than were those children with siblings (Bates & Learned, 1946; Hurlock & Burstein, 1932).

Acquiring a new sibling presents an expected motivation for creating an imaginary companion, but Gleason, Sebanc, and Hartup (2000) revealed that mothers reported personification of objects happened frequently after children acquired a new toy. Some studies connected the emergence of children’s imaginary companion play with parental absence like death or divorce (Klein, 1985). Other studies, such as those conducted by Hurlock and Burstein (1932)
show that family cohesiveness or structure has not been found to be related to children’s imaginary companion play; no correlation was found between imaginary companion play and divorced or single parent households.

Family environmental type has been found to be correlated with children’s imaginary companion play; rather than quiet contexts, active family contexts in which children and family members share activities and discussion are more likely to produce imaginary companion play (Manosevitz et al., 1973). Yet, in a later comparison study of characteristics of children with and without imaginary companions, the percentages of children with imaginary companions and children without imaginary companions who reported spending time in activities with parents and siblings were not significantly different; a surprising 71% of children without imaginary companions were reported to engage in more activities with siblings (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999).

Parents have reported that some imaginary companions are created out of admiration for real people like friends and siblings, names which the child may fancy, story characters, superheroes, and media exposure (Ames & Learned, 1946; Hoff, 2005; Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Singer & Singer, 1981; Svendsen, 1934; Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993; Vostrotsky, 1895). Even though parents and children alike are likely to describe a child’s imaginary companion, it seems that fairly little is really known about the reason for the appearance children’s imaginary companions; Masih (1978) maintained that greater than 50% of all imaginary companions have no identifiable
triggering event. The same is true for the demise of an imaginary companion. Sometimes the demise of an imaginary companion is reported and described by the child as a “real” death (Kastenbaum & Fox, 2008), but more often it has been suggested that imaginary companions, like old toys and uninteresting activities, are discarded due to boredom or no identifiable reason (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004).

**Population: Parental Reports and Concerns**

Parental reports of children’s imaginary companion play are varied. In a study examining imaginary companion play among preschool children, Gleason, Sebanc, and Hartup (2000) reported that slightly over 50% of parents stated that their children had created an imaginary companion; some parents had incorrect information or were completely unaware that their child had an imaginary companion (Taylor & Manning, 2006). Parents sometimes report feeling like an intruder (Hurlock & Burstein, 1932) and can regard the child’s ownership and personal knowledge of the imaginary companion as secretive. A recent study by Bouldin (2006) offers a completely different scenario of parent and child reporting as children’s reports of participation or non-participation in imaginary companion play were exactly the same as parents’ reports.

In a study dedicated solely to the evaluation of parents as reporters of their children’s descriptions of imaginary companions, Gleason (2004a) found that for both groups (children-with and children-without imaginary companions), parents’ reports agreed with children’s reports for general descriptions of the
imaginary companion. However, overall parent and child agreement for invisible friends was greater than for personified objects.

Parental reactions range from surprise (Jalongo, 1984) to pride in their child’s powers of imagination (Svendsen, 1934) to worry for their child’s emotional stability (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Taylor, 1999). Parents sometimes worry that the child who engages in imaginary companion play is confused about the distinction between fantasy and reality or that the child is being drawn toward a tendency to lie (Svendsen, 1934; Taylor, 1999); some parents even worry that the child is unconsciously dabbling in communication with spirit entities (Taylor, 1999). Those parents who seem to be most concerned worry that their child’s creation of an imaginary companion may signal loneliness or lack of real friends (Ames & Learned, 1946; Gleason, Sebanc, and Hartup, 2000; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006). Most of the time, parents—both mothers and fathers—see imaginary companion play as typical for a young child (Gleason, 2005).

**Population: Cultural Differences**

Early concepts of children’s imaginary companions were often identified as spirits or supernatural entities and treated according to spiritual or cultural guidelines. Harvey (1918) identified children’s imaginary companion play as psychopathological and noted parents’ reports and interpretations of imaginary companion play as spiritual bondage or demonic possession; nearly a century later some religious sects, like old-order Mennonite, required exorcism of
imaginary companions (Allison, 2000). Some cultures and subcultures, such as those in India (Mills, 2003) and Native American (Taylor, 1999) recognize imaginary companions as spiritual beings with identities of former lives which are received by the child, rather than generated by the child. Cultures with marginal incidence of imaginary companion play, like India, Mexico, and New Guinea, demonstrate little concept of childhood imaginative play and often no time or opportunity for solitary play (Mills, 2003; Taylor, 1999; Mead, 1975).

Few studies have dealt with ethnic differences on children’s imaginary companion play. However, a recent study by Mathur and Smith (2007) focused on the nature of imaginary companions in 43 ethnically diverse (African-American, Latino, Vietnamese, and Caucasian) young children in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Although the study reported no gender differences in having an imaginary companion, slight differences were seen in the imaginary companions of ethnic groups. There was a trend for African-American children to be more inclined to participate in imaginary companion play than the three other ethnic groups included in the study. Regarding children’s descriptions of their imaginary companions, Vietnamese children offered rich descriptions and very specific details of their imaginary companions. Although based upon a small population (n=43), this study represents the opportunity for additional investigation among diverse and ethnic childhood populations.
Defining Feature: Friendship

As a scholar new to the field of imaginary companion play, I recognize friendship, ownership, and imagination as the defining features of children’s imaginary companion play; of these, perhaps the most striking defining feature of imaginary companion play is its similarity to real friendships. Identified as pretend play, Harris (2000) categorized instances of imaginary companion play as sustained role play. Sustained role play with imaginary companions represents a type of child-initiated, simulated social interaction. Gleason (2004) writes, “As with real friends, children play with their imaginary companions, pretend with them, involve them in their daily routines, and occasionally argue with them” (p. 205). While children usually have relationships resembling friendships with their invisible companions, relationships with toy imaginary companions assume more of a caretaking relationship (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000). Regardless of the type of imaginary companion (invisible, toy, or impersonation), the central function of an imaginary companion is companionship (Segal, 2004; Taylor, 1999), which may explain why children usually create and describe imaginary companions who are mostly the same age as themselves (Hoff, 2005).

Research literature suggests that play with an imaginary companion offers benefits like social provisions similar to relationships with real friends. Howes (1996) cites companionship as a main feature of friendship in the early years of childhood. Gleason, (2002) demonstrated that 4-year-olds with imaginary companions reported no observable differences between their real friendships
and imaginary companion friendships on the social provisions of conflict, instrumental assistance, nurturance, and power. As in real friendships with actual friends, children create conflicts with imaginary companions, express anger and resentment, and sometimes even fear their imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999). Caughey (1984) revealed that some children may go as far as to pretend that they are not available to play with their imaginary companions. Observably, a range of strong emotions is elicited by imaginary companions. “Children often love their imaginary companions very much, sometimes even more than their real friends,” (Taylor, 1999 p. 113; also see Hurlock & Burstein, 1932).

In basic concepts like benefits, social provisions, and emotional connections, imaginary companions may bear a strong resemblance to various types of real-life friends. For example:

... imaginary companions could be the ultimate reciprocal friends, if children chose to imagine their pretend friends as acquiescing to their every wish. Children’s relationships with imaginary companions could also be conceptualized as unilateral. After all, no real person is interacting with the child, and children’s imaginations may be limited in the extent to which they can conjure up a friend who provides them with all of the benefits of a real reciprocal friendship. (Gleason & Hohmann, 2006 p. 130)

In an effort to establish a better understanding of this overlap between friendship concepts, Gleason and Hohmann (2006) conducted a comparison
study of concepts regarding reciprocal, unilateral, imaginary, and non-friends by identifying five benefits of relationships, or social provisions, derived from the theoretical framework of Weiss (1974) and the Network of Relationships Inventory developed by Furman and Buhrmester (1987). These five provisions are: companionship, intimacy, reliable alliance, affection, and enhancement of worth. The absence of statistical distinction between imaginary and reciprocal friends on any of the five social provisions reinforces and extends previous research by Gleason (2002), who found that:

... children did not draw sharp distinctions between imaginary companions and best friends on the social provisions of conflict, power, instrumental help, and nurturance. The concepts that underlie children’s relationships with imaginary companions may thus overlap. Children’s relationships with their imaginary companions may be elaborations of their experiences in relationships with real friends and with reciprocal friends in particular.

(Gleason & Hohmann, 2006, p. 141)

Relationships with real friends and reciprocal friends aside, social experience and relationship skills are not necessary for the creation of an imaginary companion and ensuing friendship. Taylor and Mottweiller (2008) explain:

... the capacity to invent and become attached to imaginary others does not require a lengthy history of social relationships or extensive experience with interpersonal interactions. Children as young as two or
three talk to their stuffed animals and listen to what they have to say. And when a child creates a personality for a toy or invents an invisible friend to serve as a special friend, that child is engaging in a basic human urge. (p. 48-49)

Exploring the role of competence in children’s invention of imaginary companions, a study by Harter and Chao questioned two possible psychodynamic mechanisms which may function in the construction and function of an imaginary companion. Children tended to create imaginary companions who were either more or less competent than themselves. The type of imaginary companion was highly related to gender. Boys were more likely to invent highly competent imaginary companions with feats often branching into the realm of the fantastic; girls created imaginary companions with realistic, life-like needs and deficiencies requiring support and care (Harter & Chao, 1992). While young children seem to prefer relationships which appear to be friendships with invisible companions (see also Vostrovsky, 1892), it is different with toy imaginary companions. Children who create toy imaginary companions are more likely to demonstrate a caretaking relationship (Gleason, Sebanc, and Hartup, 2000). Whether invisible friends, personified objects, or impersonated characters are created as imaginary companions, friendship seems to be the central defining feature.

**Defining Feature: Ownership**

While friendship is the most striking defining feature of imaginary companion play, I recognize ownership as the second defining feature of
imaginary companion play. The child alone creates, directs, and dictates the imaginary companion and is thus the owner of the imaginary companion and the friendship. Even in the case of a personified object, which is physically tangible, the child is still the creator and owner of the invented and invisible personality. Friedberg (1995) explained that “... as a result of their invisibility to others, imaginary companions are the child’s true possessions. Accordingly, they do not have to be shared, and so the child remains in complete control of the object” (p. 2).

In imaginary companion play fantasy, the will, actions, speech, and emotions of the imaginary companion are subject to the child’s control and direction (Partington & Grant, 1984). Many young children are able to fully describe their imaginary companions (Friedberg & Taylor, 1997; Nagera, 1969; Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993). Children remain the sole and true authorities of their imaginary companions (Nagera, 1969; Taylor & Manning, 2006) and even verbally claim authorship of the personal characteristics of their imaginary companions (Taylor & Mottweiler, 2008). These reports points to ownership as a defining feature of imaginary companion play.

**Defining Feature: Imagination**

*(Imaginative Play, Fantasy/Reality Distinction, Fantasy Predisposition, and Fantasy Style)*

Friendship and ownership define the creation of imaginary companions for young children, but adults often refer to the child’s imagination when discussing
imaginary companions (Gleason, 2004; Svenden, 1934; Taylor, 1999).

Imagination is manifested reciprocally in young children’s play, and imaginative play has been strongly linked with imaginary companion play (Singer & Singer, 1990). I suggest that imagination should be considered as the third defining feature of imaginary companion play.

Drawn from the imagination and classified as imaginative play in Hughes’s taxonomy of play (2006), Else (2009) defines imaginative play as “… where the child plays outside the confines of the physical world and plays with things that are not really there or could not really happen. Examples include: imagining you are, or pretending to be, a tree or car, or having a friend who isn’t there” (p. 79). In The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World (2008), Susan Linn establishes a definition for imagination as “Make believe or pretend play, (is what) I think of as creating fantasy characters, imagining different realities, and transporting ourselves to pretend worlds other than the one we live in” (p. 11). Described as “… pretense that goes beyond the child’s experiences,” (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007, p. 7) imagination is conceptualized as free and ultimately boundless. I have often heard imagination connected with phrases like “running away with” and “got the best of” as if imagination reigns over the will of the child. However Spitz (2006) reminds us to remember that “Although we speak of the imagination as free and unfettered, we do in fact retain mastery over it. We can always return from it to the world of everyday reality. Children learn this best” (p. 212). It is perhaps this fluidity of movement between the
boundaries of reality and fantasy, a hallmark of imagination and imaginative play, which truly characterizes the uniqueness of imaginary companion play.

Concerning fantasy and reality, and their context within imagination, Piaget (1929) believed that young children mistakenly confused thoughts and objects which resulted in a number of mistaken assumptions, referred to as “magical thoughts.” Piaget explained that children believed that reality could be changed by thought, affected by action or desire, or modified by interaction between objects. Piaget’s “magic by participation” theory was later reinforced through work by Rothbaum and Weisz (1988) who identified a magical thinking stage from 2 to 6 years of age during which young children demonstrate their belief that thoughts and wishes determine objects and events. Although young children can identify and classify fantasy/reality statements around the age of 3, the presentation of conflicting evidence may result in fantastic or magical explanations.

Laboratory studies have been conducted in which credulous children wrongly classified imaginary representations as reflections of reality and referred to magical explanations when regarding conflicting evidence (Harris, Brown, Marriott, Whittall, and Harmer, 1991; Johnson & Harris, 1994; Wooley and Wellman, 1993). Johnson and Harris (1994) explained that credulous children justify conflicting events or information with transforming beliefs, such as magical beliefs; however, credulous children do not necessarily have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality. The act of the imagination itself
encourages transforming beliefs, and individual differences in credulity might account for individual differences in fantasy predisposition and the presence of imaginary companions in some children. Children with imaginary companions may experience some fantasy-reality confusion because of the ease with which they can bring mental images to mind and their tendency to revert to magical beliefs. Consequently, these children may entertain the possibility that mental images can be reflected in reality. (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001, p. 99-114)

Wooley (1997) approached children’s imaginative play, fantasy characters, and the boundary between fantasy and reality with the recommendation to distinguish between “fantastical thinking” and “thinking about fantasy” and explained there are also many instances in children’s daily lives in which they do not act as if they believe imagination created reality. Woolley offered three factors which influence children’s fantastical thinking about imagination: type of entities children imagine (everyday versus supernatural?); children’s judgments about imagined entities (whether or not they want the entity to appear); whether or not the imagined entity is projected outside the head (p. 992-994). Woolley declared that “...imaginary companions may be the clearest case of something that is projected outside the head” (p. 995). Again supporting the link between imaginary companion play and imagination which represents the fluidity of young children’s movement between fantasy and reality, children do not demonstrate confusion in their imaginative thinking and imaginative play concerning imaginary companions; they know that imaginary companions are
different from real friends (Gleason, 2004b; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Taylor, 1993, 1997). Taylor (1999) explained that the creation of an imaginary companion may serve to sharpen children’s awareness of the fantasy/reality distinction and increase children’s ability to purposely differentiate between fantasy and reality.

Studies of imaginary companion play have continued to investigate children’s ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality, children’s predisposition to fantasy, and the connections between imaginary companion play and types of imaginative play. In a landmark study assessing the fantasy predisposition of children with and children without imaginary companions, Bouldin and Pratt (2001) investigated children’s verbal behavior and non-verbal responses to the introduction of a conflicting event. The researchers interviewed children, asked children to envision a monster, and then later projected an image of a monster on the side of a small tent in the room. Bouldin and Pratt then assessed the children’s verbal behavior and non-verbal responses and reported the following results. A significantly larger number of children with imaginary companions than children without imaginary companions: stated that they thought they had seen a monster; physically moved in response to seeing the silhouette; intermittently looked at the tent during play with the toys; when asked, thought there may have been a monster in the tent; reported experiencing daydreams and scary thoughts with mythical content. The authors believed that children with imaginary companions may consider that imaginary
representations can be reflected in reality; however, the study did not conclude that children with and without imaginary companions differed in the extent to which they believed an imaginary representation could be reflected in reality. Regardless of whether or not children had an imaginary companion, they believed in the likelihood that their mental representation of a monster had encouraged the monster’s existence. The study did report differences regarding the participation of children with and without imaginary companions in daydreams and striking mental imagery. These reports were consistent with previous explanations (Singer, 1961), including children’s reports that people and objects in their daydreams seemed so very real as to almost be present with the children. Consideration of these findings and Singer’s (1973, 1977) claim that mental imagery ability is related to fantasy disposition suggests that children with imaginary companions have a predisposition to fantasy (p. 113). Children’s ability to create mental images and demonstration of a fantasy disposition may indicate that children with imaginary companions have a predisposition to fantasy (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001).

Addressing fantasy predisposition and fantasy style, Bouldin (2006) tested whether children with imaginary companions have a different or distinct fantasy experience than children without imaginary companions. Through interview protocol, the author focused on five aspects of fantasy experience: imaginary companions, dreams, daydreams, scary thoughts, and pretend games. Results showed that children who had imaginary companions were more likely than
children without imaginary companions to report vivid imagery when
daydreaming and playing pretend games; mythical content in daydreams and
games of pretense were also reported. Also, children with imaginary companions
described multiple fantasy images and provided highly detailed descriptions of
their fantasies. Questions about fantasy predisposition and heightened fantasy
style has also led to a recent study in which children with imaginary companions
were reported to demonstrate a general susceptibility to engage in imaginary
verbal and auditory experiences (Fernyhough, Bland, Meins, & Coltheart, 2007)
which may further establish the relationship between imagery, fantasy
disposition, and predisposition to fantasy.

Fantasy predisposition and fantasy style for children who engage in
imaginary companion play is also evident in the type of imaginative play that
children choose. Preschool boys who participated in imaginary companion play
were more likely to choose fantasy play in preference over object or reality-
based play (Taylor, et al., 1993). Gleason et al. (1997) reported results indicating
a connection between imaginary companion play and role play; children whose
imaginary companions functioned as personified objects demonstrated a greater
degree of role play than children who did not have imaginary companions.

Imagination, as evidenced by imaginative play, fantasy/reality distinction,
and fantasy disposition-predisposition-style must be considered the final defining
feature of imaginary companion play. While researchers may fractionate the
defining features for study, children reciprocally experience the three defining features of imaginary companion play: friendship, ownership, and imagination.

**Qualities and Differences of Children with Imaginary Companions**

What are the qualities of young children who create imaginary companions? Are children who create imaginary companions different from children who do not create imaginary companions? What percentage of the childhood population actually engages in this phenomenon? Due to varying operational definitions, inconsistencies exist in the estimate of the childhood population who participate in imaginary companion play. Using Taylor’s (1999) definition, studies showed a 28% rate of occurrence for 3- and 4-year-olds (Taylor & Carlson, 1997); a 48% rate for 5-6 year-olds (Triofi & Reese, 2009); a 31% rate of occurrence for 6- and 7-year-olds and 49% for children overall (Taylor, Carlson, Gerow, & Charley, 2004). The highest rate of imaginary companion play during childhood, 65%, still belongs to Singer and Singer (1990). Regardless of population estimates, obviously some children choose to create imaginary companions, and some children do not. How then, are children who engage in imaginary companion play different from children who do not engage in imaginary companion play?
Beyond Psychopathology

Research literature has discussed diverse correlates of imaginary companion play for children. Aside from psychopathology, four likely connections, or hypotheses, have been suggested by Seiffge-Krenke (2001): the giftedness hypothesis, the deficit hypothesis, the narcissism hypothesis, and the impulse control hypothesis (see also, Hoff, 2005). Giftedness is often associated with creativity and imagination. The deficit hypothesis considers that imaginary companion play can make up for the missing factors in the child’s family or environment. The narcissism hypothesis considers that children with imaginary companions are resistant to abandon the egocentrism associated with early childhood development and is perhaps connected with separation or abandonment issues like death or abuse. The impulse control hypothesis assumes that children with imaginary companions derive ego support necessary for self regulation. Constructed to identify the uses of imaginary companions for young children, I believe these four possible distinctions may also best represent the categorical differences between children who have imaginary companions and children who do not have imaginary companions.

My adaptation of Seiffge-Krenke’s four hypotheses has not been previously utilized in research literature of imaginary companion play and should be considered exploratory in nature. However, different correlates of children’s imaginary companion play, including differences between children who have
imaginary companions and children who do not have imaginary companions, easily align with Seiffge-Krenke’s four hypotheses.

**Gifted Hypothesis**

Children who create imaginary companions are often described as gifted; imaginary companions are sometimes interpreted by researchers as the works or products of a creative mind (Singer & Singer, 1990). Creativity has been defined as a “productive or novel way of experiencing reality—including the perceiver’s own self” (Hoff & Carlsson, 2002, p. 22; see also Hoff, 2005). Scholars have hypothesized that imaginary companion play represents increased creative potential among children who create, or experience, friends from fantasy (Smith & Carlsson, 1990).

Somers and Yawkey (1984) offered instances of children’s creative development and increased intellectual growth as inspired by imaginary companion play. Children who engage in imaginary companion play benefit from the social interaction offered by participating in roles; children who have imaginary companions showed increased levels of creative thought, awareness of imaginative play opportunities, and more original ideas regarding uses of objects in play.

Children who engage in imaginary companion play demonstrate an increased inclination toward other forms of fantasy and fantasy play (Bouldin, 2006; Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Taylor & Carlson, 1997) including paracosms, or imaginary worlds (Cohen & MacKeith, 1991). In paracosms, children create
fictional worlds and societies with highly developed societies, languages, roles, and people, which may often include imaginary companions (Cohen & MacKeith, 1991; Milne, 1972; Singer & Singer, 1990; Spitz, 2006; Wullschlager, 1995). The complexity of creating and maintaining a paracosm over time may indicate a higher degree of creativity or giftedness, especially for those children who include imaginary companions (Hoff, 2005).

As giftedness and creativity are manifested in young children’s language and narrative skills, it is reasonable to consider that children who create imaginary companions are different in their language development than children who do not create imaginary companions. The research concerning imaginary companion play and language correlates has established a promising developmental connection between young children’s pretend play and language. Singer and Singer (1990) found that 3- and 4-year-old boys who engage in imaginary companion play speak more frequently and fashion lengthier phrases and sentences than boys of the same age group who do not participate in imaginary companion play. Advances in receptive vocabulary were reported among young children who participate in imaginary companion play, as compared to children who do not engage in imaginary companion play (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Children with imaginary companions use syntax with a higher degree of complexity, including increased adverbial and relative clauses, compared to children who do not have imaginary companions (Bouldin, Bavin, & Pratt, 2002).
Moving into the realm of narrative, Trionfi and Reese (2009) conducted a comparative study in which children who participated in imaginary companion play demonstrated richer narrative skills than children who did not participate in imaginary companion play.

These linguistic correlates of imaginary companion play extend theories of a developmental connection between pretend play and language. Even from a very young age, children’s symbolic play is interwoven with their language development and use (Shore, O’Connell, & Bates, 1984), such as the correlation between early symbolic play of toddlers and later language incorporating semantic diversity (Tamis-LaMonde & Bornstein, 1994).

**Deficit Hypothesis**

The deficit hypothesis considers that imaginary companion play can compensate for areas which are lacking in the life of the child. The family structure, environment, and immediate social context may not provide components which fill the child’s needs, and the creation of an imaginary companion may provide a transitional support, much like Winnicott’s transitional object (1971).

The majority of children who participate in imaginary companion play are firstborn or only children (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Manosevitz, Prentice, & Wison, 1973), but children with moderately to widely spaced siblings also are likely to have imaginary companions (Svendsen, 1946; Taylor, 1999). Children in these family contexts may create imaginary
companions as a way to fill a need for companionship; the fact that children with imaginary companions are able to fill this need independently may make them different from children without imaginary companions. Regardless of their children’s creativity and independence evident in the creation of an imaginary companion, parents still report worry that their child’s creation of an imaginary companion may signal loneliness or lack of real friends (Ames & Learned, 1946; Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006).

Hoff (2005) reminds researchers to approach the use of parental reports with caution as first-born children with imaginary companions may be more often noticed by parents or that later-born children may not readily share their imaginary companions. Hoff’s suggestion brings an interesting alternative explanation to earlier studies in which first-born or only children with imaginary companions were reported as shy or lacking appropriate social skills (Ames & Learned, 1946; Svendsen, 1934).

The deficit hypothesis also can be applied to gender differences in imaginary companion play. Regarding gender, imaginary companion play is more likely among young girls than young boys (Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Gleason, 2004; Hoff, 2005; Pearson, House, Dowell, Ainsworth, Dawson, & Simms, 2001; Taylor & Carlson, 1997, 2004). Boys are more likely to impersonate a character (Carlson & Taylor, 2005), which Harris (2000) identifies as a form of role play. Boys not only create character-based imaginary companions, they often assume the character roles and persona of the imaginary companions. Role play is often
used by young children to work through expectations, challenges, disappointments, and areas of personal deficit. While girls are more likely to create an imaginary friend, boys are more likely to become an imaginary character. The act of imaginary creation makes children with imaginary companions different from children without imaginary companions. The disparate types of imaginary companions created by boys and by girls may signal the need for future study that delves into the complexity of form and function of children’s pretense, both in disposition and predisposition, to better understand gender differences in imaginary companion play.

Hoff (2005) found a significant correlate in her study of creativity and self-image in middle childhood. Investigating Swedish children with and children without imaginary companions, only 42% of boys created animals as imaginary companions, while 60% of girls created animals as imaginary companions. This was an unexpected response; typically the rates are reversed (Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Mannering, 2006). Results of the study also indicated that girls, as opposed to boys, played more often with other real friends in conjunction with their imaginary companions. Expected differences that historically have been aligned with gender were not corroborated. Hoff suggests that the more diverse gender roles in Sweden may require children with imaginary companions to choose cultural similarity. Whether imaginary companions are created to address a deficit or as a reflection of cultural change, it is apparent that cultural comparisons regarding gender differences in children who engage in imaginary
companion play are necessary to better understand how children who create imaginary companions are different from children who do not create imaginary companions.

**Narcissism Hypothesis**

The narcissism hypothesis considers that children with imaginary companions are resistant to abandon the egocentrism associated with early childhood development. It may be possible that resistance to leave behind the egocentrism of early development may be dealt with in a positive way by imaginary companion play; thus the narcissism hypothesis could represent another manner in which children with imaginary companions are different than children without imaginary companions. Young children who are troubled use pretend play, including imaginary companion play, to cope with challenges, changes, and adversity (Bender & Vogel, 1941; Friedberg & Taylor, 1997; Nagera, 1969).

Harris (2000) identified all types of imaginary companion play as pretend play, specifically role play. The thoughts, words, actions, and emotions of the imagined other are created by the child. Regarding distinctions of role play, Harris outlined three vehicles for the imaginary companion; an object as a vehicle, an invisible vehicle, and the child’s self as a vehicle. Researchers have estimated that about 30%-50% of all imaginary companions are based on objects; the remaining are invisible companions (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor, 1999). Taylor and Mannering reported that occasionally children
will develop very vivid, intense, and “interactive” relationships with objects (2007, p. 229). It has been established that the psychological components that distinguish children with imaginary companions from children without imaginary companions remain constant for children with toy imaginary companions and invisible imaginary companions (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). However, Taylor and Mannering (2007) caution scholars not to collapse toy companions and invisible companions into a single category, and I consider this reasonable advice. I believe the distinct creations of toy and invisible imaginary companions could possibly indicate a difference associated with narcissism. The types of relationships children develop with their imaginary companions may provide insight into how children with imaginary companions and children without imaginary companions are different in terms of dealing with resistance, abandonment, and separation.

Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup (2000) reported that children are more likely to have relationships like friendships with invisible others, while children with toy imaginary companions demonstrate a caretaking relationship. Children who create caretaking relationships with toy imaginary companions may be attempting to work through difficult issues or comfort themselves by offering care to the toy imaginary companion. An interesting aspect of imaginary companions is that they sometimes do not comply with children’s wishes; imaginary companions may be disagreeable, naughty, bossy, and even mean (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Nagera, 1969; Taylor, 1999). In fact, Taylor and
Mannering (2007) reported that about 1% of imaginary companions in their study were especially scary for the child which perhaps may offer child-controlled scenarios in which to process, revisit, or repair experiences from life.

Often children create imaginary companions around the time of transition, whether happy – like the birth of a sibling, or sad – like the loss of a friend or pet (Friedberg & Taylor, 1997; Clark, 2007; Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor, 1999), or in physical pain due to illness or injury (Taylor & Mannering, 2007). Some specific studies have connected imaginary companion play with parental absence like death or divorce (Klein, 1985; Svendsen, 1934), sexual abuse (Sanders, 1992; Silberg, 1998), and companionship during loss (Putman, 1997). Imaginary companions have provided friendship, confidentiality, positive reflection, buffering for pain, and protection for children with dissociative disorder (Putman, 1997; Sanders, 1992; see also Taylor & Mannering, 2007).

Children with needs related to narcissism, loss, or transition who engage in imaginary companion play demonstrate amazing adaptive behavior. Still, to date no studies have been conducted which specifically investigate how children with imaginary companions may compensate for needs associated with the narcissism hypothesis and the associated ways in which such children may be different from children without imaginary companions.

**Impulse Control Hypothesis**

The impulse control hypothesis assumes that children with imaginary companions derive ego support necessary for self regulation; scholars are
interested in whether children who engage in imaginary companion play
demonstrate better social competence than children who do not engage in
imaginary companion play. The research literature concerning the social
competence of children with imaginary companions compared to children without
imaginary companions is conflicted. Some researchers have concluded that
children with imaginary companions do not demonstrate the degree of social
competence seen in children without imaginary companions (Bouldin & Pratt,
1999; Harter & Chao, 1992). Other researchers have conducted studies which
reported that children with imaginary companions demonstrate increased social
competence (Manosevitz, Prentice, & Wilson, 1973; Singer & Singer, 1990;
Taylor, 1999). When drawn from delineated categories, differences in the type
and degree of social competence in children with imaginary companions and
children without imaginary companions may be better understood.

Imaginary companion play is related to children’s social skills and
emotional health. Compared to children without imaginary companions, children
with imaginary companions reported similar or better instances of real
friendships (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, Sebanc, & Wilson, 2000; Taylor,
Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993). Children with imaginary companions also enjoy
acceptance by their peers with rates that match those of children without
imaginary companions (Gleason, 2004). Children with imaginary companions do
not demonstrate lower or higher levels of shyness than children without
imaginary companions (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002). Although parents reported that
children with imaginary companions demonstrated more anxiety-related behaviors than children without imaginary companions, the reports of anxiety did not merit clinical classification (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002).

Retrospective reports indicate that adults who had imaginary companions during childhood have more personable adult social skills than adults who did not have childhood imaginary companions (Gleason, Jarudi, & Cheek, 2003) and also describe themselves as no more or less shy or withdrawn than adults who did not engage in imaginary companion play as children (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002).

It has been suggested that imaginary companion play offers a crucial link between fantasy and reality by providing a private, internal play context in which young children are able to practice, manipulate, and control social roles and expectations (Partington & Grant, 1984). Internal practice through imaginary companion play may account for the positive emotionality and lower aggression during play demonstrated by children with imaginary companions as compared to children without imaginary companions (Singer & Singer, 1990). Children with imaginary companions have been classified as happier during routine family activities, more likely to engage in shared parent-child dialogue than children without imaginary companions, and prefer play with real friends as opposed to imaginary companions when presented with a choice between friend types (Manosevitz, Prentice, & Wilson, 1973).

Involvement in pretense and fantasy play has been shown to facilitate young children’s theory of mind, specifically through role play (Harris, 2000;
Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Even after controlling for verbal ability and skills, 4-year-old children who engaged in more role play than the comparison sample demonstrated advanced theory of mind by distinguishing appearance from reality and showing awareness of the perspective of another individual (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Two-year-old children with imaginary companions, more than children without imaginary companions, recognized that another individual can have a false belief; this same group of children with imaginary companions demonstrated a higher interest in fantasy, greater visual perspective taking, and a wider use of mental state vocabulary (Carlson, Gum, Davis, & Malloy, 2003).

Rather than a representation of Piaget’s belief that imaginary companion play is a simple distortion of assimilation of reality to the young child’s own ego (Piaget, 1926), role play through imaginary companion play is related to an increased ability to adopt the perspective of another person, which is an important component to add in the consideration of the impulse control hypothesis.

How are children with imaginary companions different from children without imaginary companions? When considering research literature and the discussion of diverse correlates of imaginary companion play for children, I have employed an adaptation of Seiffge-Krenke’s four hypotheses: the giftedness hypothesis, the deficit hypothesis, the narcissism hypothesis, and the impulse control hypothesis. Originally constructed to identify the uses of imaginary companions for young children, I believe these four hypotheses, or possible
distinctions, represent the categorical differences between children who have imaginary companions and children who do not have imaginary companions. My adaptation of Seiffge-Krenke’s four hypotheses has not been previously utilized in the discussion of research literature concerning imaginary companion play and should be considered exploratory in nature. In conclusion, different correlates of children’s imaginary companion play, including differences between children who have imaginary companions and children who do not have imaginary companions, easily align with Seiffge-Krenke’s four hypotheses.

Connection between Pretend Play and Narrative Skills

The central purpose of this study is to extend existing research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating the area of narrative. Play theorists identify imaginary companion play as a sustained and complex type of role play (Harris, 2000). Over time, imaginary companion play may become richly detailed, more abstract, and highly complex (Bouldin, 2006; Singer & Singer, 1990; Spitz, 2006; Taylor, 1999). Imaginary companion play is conceptualized as perhaps the most complex expression of play in early childhood (Klaussen & Passman, 2007; Triofi & Reese, 2009). Likewise, theorists and scholars identify narrative, specifically decontextualized language, as one of the richest and most highly detailed linguistic expressions in early childhood (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Snow, 1983).
The significance of children's narrative skills has attracted recent attention from researchers (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). “Narrative skills can be considered the ‘gateway to reading and writing’ (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, Newcomb, & de Villiers, 2005, p. 6) because creating a narrative requires a child to produce a decontextualized description of events” (Currenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 377). The connection between imaginary companion play and children’s narrative skills can be better understood by examining the concept of narrative and the theoretical base which connects pretend play and narrative.

**Narrative**

The definitions of narrative are, I believe, focused upon culture, content, and structure or linguistic relationships embedded within text. From a cultural perspective, Gee (1991) defined narrative as “fundamentally a perspective that human beings take on the way in which certain themes fall into a satisfying pattern, a perspective stemming from their social identity and the resources their social group(s) make available to them” (p. 13). Bruner (1996) classified narrative as both a mode of thought and an expression of a culture’s world view. Due to their language-thought enmeshed nature, Fivush and Haden (2003) described narratives as “... culturally prescribed forms for organizing events through canonicalized linguistic frameworks” (p. viii).
A recent definition of narrative which has been based upon narrative content, and arranged around text content (micro-analysis) and text structure (macro-analysis), Roth (2009) defines narrative as a:

a type of discourse that involves the comprehension, production, and recall of extended units of speech. Stories and oral exposition (or explanatory discourse) are two major genres of narration. Stories involve characters that engage in goal-directed actions to resolve problems or complications. Early-developing oral expository texts consist mainly of scripts and personal narratives that informally describe or recount one’s experiences. (Roth, 2009, p. 153)

Curenton and Lucas (2007) explain narratives as “… descriptions of events or ideas that are logically related because they fall within the same time period, which is usually indicated by verb tense” (p. 378). Definitions of narrative have also been centered on structure and linguistic relationships within text. Based upon the work of Grimes (1975), Peterson and McCabe (1991) identified three primary structural themes which characterize narratives: content, cohesion, and staging. Peterson and McCabe pointed to the “defining property of a narrative (as) a recapitulation of temporally sequenced events” (p. 32). Often attached to the structure-oriented definition of narrative, psycholinguistics, or the examination of types and functions of linguistic units used in the production of speech, has extended the concept of narrative to include stylistic orientations within the construction and organization of narrative discourse (Gee, 1986).
Whether based on definitions which reflect culture, content, or structure and linguistics, ultimately, I interpret definitions of narrative as a reflection of the theoretical understanding that narrative is a primary pathway of human cognitive activity that is learned and utilized by children to organize their thinking and make sense of the world (Bruner, 1985). Young children organize their existing knowledge, incorporate new information, play out perspectives, and generally make sense of the world through pretend play and narrative. Therefore, the connection between imaginary companion play and children’s narrative skills can be better understood by examining the theoretical base that connects pretend play and narrative.

**Theoretical Explanation**

The connections between pretend play and children’s narrative skills have been well explored and documented (Engel, 1995; Fein, Ardila-Rey, & Goth, 2000; Sutton-Smith, 1984). Found in both pretend play and narrative is the creation or production of narrative scenes, or scenarios. Research on children’s “play narratives” is based on the commonality of scenario production in both pretend play and narrative (Pellegrini & Galda, 1990). Nicolopoulou (2007) locates both pretend play and narrative (storytelling) on a continuum ranging from:

...the discursive exposition of narratives in storytelling to their enactment in pretend play ... (in which) both play and storytelling should be viewed as complementary expressions of children’s symbolic imagination that
draw from and reflect back on the interrelated domains of emotional, intellectual, and social life. (p. 249)

The initial theoretical basis for understanding the symbolic forms of action in children’s pretend play and narrative thinking can be found in works of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner.

Piaget (1955) believed that young children develop the representational capability to use signifiers (like words) and signifieds (like people) as a general semiotic function; children progress gradually along a developmental continuum. According to Piaget’s model of development, children progress through assimilation or interaction with people and objects; assimilation reflects a preset plan resembling simple imitation and was classified as egocentric or autistic. As children mature, they modify their actions according to new information; Piaget referred to this modification as accommodation. Both assimilation and accommodation are necessary for development; during the assimilative process children rehearse symbolically representing objects, people, and events, while during the accommodative process children develop socially signified concepts like words to represent their world and experience to others.

Children strive to communicate their desires, plans, and experiences during social play with others, and social interaction becomes the norm of young children’s social-symbolic play. Gradually social-symbolic play is transformed into more abstract, decontextualized, and social play (Fein, 1981).
Vygotsky (1976) described play as the leading source of development in pre-school years and maintained that, “In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 552). Viewing play as a natural context for learning, Vygotsky explained that young children eventually learn to view objects and meanings as distinct; he believed that pretend or make-believe play functioned as an important context for the development of such abstract thought. Vygotsky wrote “Play with an imaginary situation is ... a novel form of behavior in which the child is liberated from situational constraints through his activity in an imaginary situation” (p.544). By differentiating between the child’s present, actual level of development and the level at which the child can perform with assistance by a more competent adult or peer, called the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky demonstrated how scaffolding can support development and learning.

Concerning the priority of play in young children’s lives and the value of imaginative play, Vygotsky (1976) wrote:

Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action is the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives- all appear in play and make it the highest level of pre-school development. The child moves forward essentially through play
activity. Only in this sense can play be termed a leading activity which
determines the child’s development. (p. 552)

Vygotsky described young children’s symbolic play as becoming more abstract as
they mature, and their play increases in complexity during symbolic play themes.
No longer requiring the physical props that they needed during the early
preschool years, most 4-year-olds demonstrate the ability to enact ideational
transformations and substitute a decontextualized definition. Communicating
ideational transformations and using decontextualized language during socio-
symbolic play is evidenced in children’s narratives.

The early scholarly work of Bruner focused on the ways in which children
developed problem-solving skills through play (1972), but his more recent
writings have highlighted the possibilities that exist in play for the narrative
development of young children. Bruner (1990) believed it was “... the human
push to organize experience narratively that assures the high priority of these
features in the program of language acquisition,” (p. 79), and further that
“...children come to recognize very early on ... that what they have done or plan
to do will be interpreted not only by the act itself but by how they tell about it”
(p. 81). Thinking resembles a conversation, albeit an internal conversation, and
often manifests as thinking aloud. Much like Russian literary scholar Bakhtin’s
an internal conversation or a “...narrative mode of thought ... a narrative “text”
or discourse. Each gives form to the other, just as thought becomes inextricable
from the language that expresses it and eventually shapes it (p. 132). Organizing their knowledge in a narrative fashion, young children act out their original narratives in story-like episodes of sociodramatic play. Bruner (1996) identified five definitive elements associated with narrative:

- Involves a sequence of events
- Sequence carries the meaning
- Narrative is a discourse
- The point of narrative is to resolve the unexpected
- Has two sides: a sequence of events and an implied evaluation of the events recounted

The interplay between Bruner’s definitive elements of narrative and children’s pretend play episodes is evident. Likewise, Bruner’s scholarly work concerning the development of children’s narrative thinking in pretend play undergirds Nicolopoulou’s (2007) model that conceptualizes pretend play and storytelling as partly separate and parallel activities which merge in the course of development. Commenting on Bruner’s theory of children’s sequential, narrative thinking, play scholars Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005) write:

This provides a direct connection between play and the verbal and logical parts of cognition. Sociodramatic play involves acting out child-constructed narrative stories. By participating in such play, children have opportunities to learn and perfect their narrative competencies which may in turn facilitate their narrative thinking abilities. (p. 42)
Thus, theoretical connections between pretend play and narrative can be found in the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner.

**Similarities between Pretend Play and Narrative**

The similarities between pretend play and narrative may exist due to a shared pattern or structure in the manner in which they function as mental tools; Feldman (2005) classifies this shared structure as mimesis which he defines as a “… mode of representation in which the relation between the symbol that represents and the thing in the world that is represented is in some sense imitative; that is, the representation resembles the thing represented” (p. 503). Feldman views mimesis as encompassing both imitation in indexical symbol and imitation in literary representation, therefore mimesis may be utilized as a lens for unpacking the similarities between pretend play and narrative as offered by contemporary researchers. Using mimesis as a lens and the discussion presented by Trionfi and Reese (2009) as an established platform, the following shared structures and patterns are considered to be similarities between pretend play and narrative: explicit language, form, composition, distinct forms of symbolic thought, and elements in a continuum of narrative activities.

Contemporary play theorists explain that children must develop and utilize explicit language to create and communicate meaning during pretend play (Bruner, 1996; Fein, 1989; Nicolopoulou, 2007; Pellegrini, 1985a). According to Pellegrini (1985b), typically, children’s object substitutions during pretend or symbolic play increase in abstraction as their play becomes decontextualized. For
the very young child, symbolic play at first relies upon the immediate presence of an object; that object is then used as a play prop. As children mature in their symbolic thinking, usually around 4 years of age, they enact symbolic play themes that do not require the use of physically present play props. Instead children use “socially defined signifiers” (p. 108) and explicit language to transform physically present or absent props, players, and pretend characters to their fantasy roles in pretend play. These symbolic play roles often involve imaginary third parties; children are able to represent appropriate and accurate actions and language of physically absent characters (Garvey, 1990).

As children collaborate toward the construction of roles, settings, goals, and conflicts (Göncü, 1993; Pellegrini, 1985b) they engage in discussions and negotiations about related components of play, like the meanings and functions of play props (Garvey, 1990). Children’s linguistic negotiations during pretend play then reveal the similarities between pretend play and narrative. Researchers have recognized similarities between pretend play and narrative in both form and composition. Common to both are canonical elements: characters, scene, goal, and conflict (Bruner, 1990; Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Trionfi & Reese, 2009).

Kavanaugh and Engel (1998) classify symbolic play and narrative as “...two distinct elements of symbolic thought in young children- pretend play and narrative- ... as conceptually related expressions of symbolic thought” (p. 81). Much like Fein’s (1979) theory that it is the productive nature of oral
language employed by young children during pretend play, rather than the development of comprehension skills, that is the important focus in the connection between play and narrative, an explanation offered by Nicolopoulou (2002) identifies pretend play and storytelling as elements within the context of a “continuum of narrative activities.” This may serve to further encourage research focus on the diversity of children’s development of symbolic and linguistic constructions.

Nicolopoulou’s recent (2007) approach concerning pretend play and storytelling:

... treats them as initially parallel and complementary modes of children’s narrative activity, with at least partly distinct origins and developmental pathways, (that) young children are gradually able to integrate effectively. Children’s play and narrative should not be artificially separated or studied in mutual isolation, but should be viewed as closely intertwined, and often overlapping, forms of socially situated symbolic action. The active interplay and cross-fertilization between pretend play and storytelling can significantly promote children’s learning and development... however, it is neither automatic or simply given (but) is a developmental achievement that, in turn, serves as a foundation and impetus for further development. (p. 268)

Later in the preschool period, pretend play and storytelling merge into sociodramatic play which is rich and complex in nature.
As a sustained and complex form of role play, imaginary companion play becomes more detailed and abstract and is a highly complex form of play expression in early childhood. Narrative, as seen by children’s decontextualized language, is a complex form of linguistic expression in early childhood. Established similarities between pretend play and narrative include: form, composition, two distinct forms of symbolic thought, (see also Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and contextualizing pretend play and narrative in a continuum of narrative activities (Nicolopoulou, 2002; 2007). Because imaginary companion play and narrative both require complex, symbolic mental and linguistic construction for creation and duration, it is therefore reasonable to expect that both imaginary companion play and narrative require decontextualization. The theoretical expectation for similar decontextualization demonstrates a strong connection between pretend play and narrative skills for young children.

**Contemporary Research Perspectives**

Experience and development for young children are closely intertwined and highly reciprocal in their nature. Contemporary researchers have investigated the complementary relationships between pretend play and narrative (Fein, Ardila-Rey, & Groth, 2000; Kavanaugh & Engel. 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1984) including the specific topic of pretend play narrative scenarios identified as play narratives (Pellegrini & Galda, 1990). The research of Nicolopoulou (2002; 2007), which identified pretend play and storytelling as complementary narrative efforts within a continuum, has been demonstrated
during previous classroom research documented by Paley (1990) who described storytelling and pretend play as “the universal learning medium” for young children (p. 10). Paley’s approach employed two interdependent activities, dictation and dramatization, within a storytelling curriculum (Paley 1981, 1990, 1997; see also Cooper, 2009). The current Playworld practice in Scandinavia is comprised of joint adult-child pretense based on a work of children’s literature, discussion, free play, and visual art production and has demonstrated significant improvements in children’s narrative skills (Baumer, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2005). The concept of play narratives as a recognized developmental activity has served to solidify the connection between pretend play and narrative.

Research literature dealing with pretend play and narrative is plentiful (Pellegrini, 1985a, 1985b; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Roskos & Christie, 2004; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010). For purposes of this theoretical explanation and the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills, the following list of research literature is seen as beneficial. Researchers have investigated the following aspects of pretend play and narrative: comprehension (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982), developmental aspects and pathways (Galda, 1984; Ilgaz & Aksu-Koc, 2005; Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993), early language (McCune, 1995; McCune-Nicolich, 1981; Shore, O’Connell, & Bates, 1984), emotional development (Herman & Bretherton, 2001; Pellegrini & Galda, 2001; Sutton-Smith, 2001a), imaginary companion play (Bouldin, Bavin, & Pratt, 2002; Trionfi,
2005; Trionfi & Reese, 2009), intervention and/or assessment (Bodrova & Leong, 2009; Bellin & Singer, 2006; Glaubman, Kashi, & Koresh, 2001; Roth, 2009), multimodal narrative (Wohlwend, 2008), pedagogy (Baumer, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2005; Cooper, 2009; Groth & Darling, 2001; Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006; Paley, 1990; Schrader, 1990), psychological constructions (Engel, 2005), teacher’s roles (Chang & Yawkey, 1998; Lindqvist, 2001), and comprehensive play and literacy literature reviews (Pellegrini, 1985a; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Roskos & Christie, 2004, 2011; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010). Significant research in these areas is indicative of the strong connection between pretend play and narrative, including explicit language, symbolic representation, and narrative activities. Still, a new research direction with additional inquiry is indicated to better understand young children’s learning and development, adult roles, appropriate practice, and supportive policies.

Perhaps the most encouraging recent determination in research direction for the play-literacy connection is the work of Roskos and Christie (2011). Known as the “play-literacy nexus,” the authors describe the nexus as “… that core space where play, language, and early literacy converge and interact” (p. 207). While recognizing classic theoretical lenses which focus on play and practice in the Piagetian view, or play as Zone of Proximal Development in the Vygotskian view, Roskos and Christie have recommended a wider use of connectionism and dynamic-systems theories. The new theoretical lens of the “play-literacy nexus” will provide a better view of literacy at work in play and vice versa by
recognizing: influences of socio-cultural variation on the development and consequences of symbolic play in early childhood; culture-specific views on the educational benefits of play at school and use of play in the curriculum; and ecological issues like opportunity for play and interactions with the environment (p. 208-210).

The purpose of this discussion has been to consider the theoretical context and contributing research literature establishing the connection between pretend play and narrative. The purpose of this proposed study is to explore the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills.

**Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children**

A central purpose of this investigation is to extend existing research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by considering children’s narrative skills. The potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills are explored in the following discussion.

Following transition periods of the 1980’s-1990’s, the current understanding of imaginary companion play includes recognizing important developmental benefits for children who engage in imaginary companion play
Current and ongoing research of imaginary companion play and narrative skills (Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and narrative skill and school success (Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaugency, 2010) have initiated a promising area of inquiry for imaginary companion play and the potential developmental benefits for young children’s narrative skills.

**Narrative Development**

Children as young as 12-18 months of age begin to construct narratives by reminiscing together, seen as confirming or repeating, with adults (Haden, 2003). By 2 years of age, children are able to create basic narrative representations of actual and fictional events and, within a range of social settings throughout their early development, experience different forms and ways of representing their knowledge using increasingly complex narrative renditions (Hicks, 1991). Children around the age of 4 are able to sustain a sophisticated discourse about past, present, and fictional events. They easily use language to represent reality out of its actual context during play and narrative; children are then no longer restricted to their own experience-based understanding of events. This shift to language representation is a process of dynamic transformation, is highly variable, and marks a fundamental change in how children make sense of their experiences (Haden, 2003; Nicolopoulou, 2002; 2007).
The development of children’s narrative skills grows within the interactive and complex environment of interactions with parents, teachers, care givers, peers, and friends – including imaginary companions. Procedures, events, and activities which occur on a regular basis offer the context in which social interactions support children’s linguistic representations of past, present, and imagined events. Therefore, according to researchers, young children’s cognitive ability to represent events using narrative is grounded in children’s social interaction (Hicks, 1991; McCabe & Peterson, 1991a).

**Language Skills**

Recent emphasis on young children’s pre-literacy and literacy skills (NCLB, 2000) has directed research foci to studies which offer established correlates between pretend play and literacy. Research on young children’s imaginary companion play has established correlates which include language skills. Compared to preschool boys without imaginary companions, Singer and Singer (1990) reported that preschool boys with imaginary companions speak more frequently and produce lengthier verbal expressions. The speech of children with imaginary companions has been shown to include more sophisticated receptive vocabulary development and mastery than children without imaginary companions (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Investigating young children’s communicative competence and referential communication skills, Roby and Kidd (2008) reported that children with imaginary companions were better able as
speakers to identify a particular referent to their interlocutor and described less redundant details of visual images than children without imaginary companions.

Bouldin, Bavin, and Pratt (2002) investigated the language use of children with imaginary companions and children without imaginary companions across two age groups: 4- and 5-year-olds and 6- and 7-year-olds. Compared with children without imaginary companions, the authors reported that children with imaginary companions demonstrated significantly greater use of adverbial clauses, relative clauses, and the conjunctive; it can be concluded that children with imaginary companions use more mature language and discourse than children without imaginary companions. These results indicated that imaginary companion play is positively associated with more mature language utilization and increased discourse skills.

In a study exploring the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for children’s narrative skills, Trionfi and Reese (2009) reported that children with and without imaginary companions were similar in their vocabulary skills, but children with imaginary companions created more complex narratives about a personal experience and a storybook than children without imaginary companions. Trionfi and Reese have conducted valuable research that offers evidence of a possible connection between pretend play and narrative occurring by the transition from early childhood to school-age.
Linguistic correlates of imaginary companion play may possibly point to a developmental connection between pretend play and language, specifically seen as a connection between imaginary companion play and narrative skills.

**Abstract Thought Processes: Decontextualization, Social Interaction, and Mental and Linguistic Constructions**

Imaginary companion play, as a detailed expression of advanced role play, increases in complexity and abstraction (Harris, 2000; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Constructing narrative, particularly utilizing decontextualized language, is a complex linguistic expression (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Nicolopoulou, 2007). Children purposely use narratives concerning reality-based event representations out of context during pretend play, including imaginary companion play (Somers & Yawkey, 1984; Triofi & Reese, 2009). Known as decontextualization, this abstract thought process is demonstrated during imaginary companion play as children employ and experience “real” social interactions with their imaginary companions. This real social interaction between children and their imaginary companions is sometimes shared with actual friends and parents (Gleason, 2002, 2004; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006) which further strengthens the use of decontextualized play, language, and narrative. Imaginary companion play and children’s narrative production, in theory, depend on sophisticated mental constructions and equally sophisticated linguistic constructions to create and sustain context (Trionfi & Reese, 2009; see also Nicolopoulou, 2007).
Narrative Skill Advantages

The relationship between imaginary companion play and young children’s narrative skills has recently attracted more attention due to growing evidence that strong narrative skill during the early childhood years is linked to reading competency in primary and elementary school years (Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010; Rhyner, 2009; see also Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Also, researchers recognize that the characteristics of symbolic play are also factors of literate behavior required in school settings (Bruner, 1996; Nicolopoulou, 2007; Pellegrini, 1985b), and the development of sound language and literacy skills is considered by researchers to be essential for success in our contemporary information-based economy (Snow & Van Hemel, 2008).

As Trionfi and Reese (2009) have reported that children with imaginary companions demonstrated stronger narrative skills than children without imaginary companions, it may be possible that young children who participate in imaginary companion play will enjoy improved reading proficiency and resulting academic achievement during their primary school experience.

The potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children include more receptive vocabulary, sophisticated language usage, and better verbal communication skills. Also demonstrated were more advanced abstract thought processes like decontextualization, social-based interaction, and mental/linguistic constructions. I believe the research that connects pretend play and storytelling indicates a
possible cognitive connection between imaginary companion play and children’s narrative skill development; this further highlights young children’s play as an important mode of narrative skill development.

A word of warning is in order regarding a possible relationship between imaginary companion play, children’s narrative skills, reading proficiency, and school success. I believe linking pretend play and narrative activity with reading proficiency and measurable achievement could be informative and beneficial, but quick assumption and application to achievement goals indicates flawed practice and is potentially harmful to young children. Nicolopoulou (2002) writes, “By fostering the development of children’s symbolic imagination and providing a field for its exercise, pretend play and fictional narratives help prepare the way for the development of abstract thinking and higher mental processes” (p. 122). Conducting research leading to beneficial application for developing children’s symbolic imagination, mature pretend play, and strong narrative skills is important, but using those research results to build assessment and testing devices for young children should be viewed with caution.

Authentic programs and approaches, like Paley’s story-telling and pretend play approach and the Scandinavian Playworld model, emphasize the developmental value of sound research and practice which combines components of pretend play and narrative skill. More research and scholarly investigation is necessary to explore the similarities and reciprocal relationship
between pretend play and children’s narrative skills. Then, the final emphasis must be upon children’s meaningful experience and development.

**Assessing the Narrative Skills of Young Children Who Participate in Imaginary Companion Play**

Recent research reports that young children who participate in imaginary companion play demonstrate stronger narrative skills than children who do not participate in imaginary companion play (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Children’s narrative skills comprise an important component of reading success (Hicks, 1991; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010). Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that children who participate in imaginary companion play will develop into strong readers during their formal primary school experience. The purpose of a framework and approach allows the occurrence of children’s imaginary companion play, narrative behaviors, and narrative productions to be observed, recorded, and assessed. The goals of this study are: to expand existing research describing imaginary companion play; to explore potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills; and to extend prior research dealing with the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play.

**Emergent Literacy Perspectives**

The phrase “framework for emergent literacy” has been defined as a model or viewpoint for a perspective which aids in the understanding of children who are in the period of time during which they develop a wide variety of
emergent literacy knowledge and skills (Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009). Rhyner, Haebig, and West outlined three central emergent literacy perspectives: the developmental perspective; the components perspective; and the child and environmental perspective. The developmental perspective describes a topic-related sequence of emergent literacy and skills contextualized within a model of child development. The components perspective focuses on the specific knowledge and skills associated with the emergent literacy process. The child and environmental influences perspective is identified by Rhyner, et al. as the most recent framework and is an expression of the increasing awareness of child development research across multiple disciplines. The child and environmental influences perspective recognizes that a child’s individual progression through different stages should be viewed as progression along a developmental continuum; the influence of the child, parent-child characteristics, home literacy environment, and relationships may influence the child’s emergent literacy development (Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009). Of these three perspectives in the framework for emergent literacy, I believe that the combination of the components perspective and the child/environmental influences perspective would offer a sound perspective for exploring the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play.

Oral language and code-related skills are recognized as markers of the emergent literacy process and comprise the foundation for literacy within the components perspective. Specific to my study is the components perspective of
Storch and Whitehurst (2002) identify the components of oral language skills as:

- Semantic knowledge (word knowledge, expressive and receptive vocabulary)
- Syntactic knowledge (knowledge of word order and grammatical rules)
- Narrative discourse (telling a story)
- Conceptual knowledge (knowledge of the world)

In complex interrelation, the components of oral language skills manifest in children’s narratives and represent main focus areas for study when observing, collecting, and assessing children’s narratives. Therefore, following the components organization of Storch and Whitehurst (2002), the main focus areas included in the components perspective in my study will be: semantic knowledge, syntactic knowledge, narrative discourse, and conceptual knowledge.

Additionally, Rhyner, Haebig, and West’s (2009) child and environmental influences perspective recognizes that the influence of the child and other developmental factors may function separately or in some reciprocal or complex relationship affecting the child’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills. I believe that the phenomenological study of children’s imaginary companion play and narrative skill development could be contextualized within the child and environmental influences perspective. By adopting this perspective as a researcher, I would acknowledge the ownership of the imaginary companion by the child and allow for consideration of the social interaction with the imaginary
companion as a context for decontextualized language. Also, I expect that parent and child characteristics, play and literacy environments, and parent-child relationships could be enfolded as they influence a child’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills – specifically narrative skills.

I will adopt the components perspective, child and environmental influences perspective (Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009) and oral language skills model (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002) as a combined emergent literacy perspective and the orienting lens for my study design.

**Assessment of Narrative**

**Recognizing the Significance**

Researchers recognize that the assessment of young children’s narratives can provide significant information about the oral language and emergent literacy skills of young children (Paris & Hoffman, 2004; Curenton & Lucas, 2007). Children who demonstrate strong narrative skills have better emergent literacy skills and reading abilities than children with narrative deficits (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004). An approach to understanding narrative structure is necessary in order to create appropriate methodology to recognize, collect, and assess young children’s narratives.

McCabe and Peterson (1991a) explained that similar to the manner in which narratives may be considered as a central mode by which humans interpret and organize their experiences “… the articulation of narrative structure is a primary means of making sense of narratives … narrative structure
represents our understanding of a narrative” (p. xiii). In both structure and purpose, narratives are a type of written text or oral discourse comprised of linguistic creations of variable lengths which contribute to a single, unified production; oral narratives are a more complex, sophisticated form of discourse than general conversation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; see also Roth, 2009). My study is focused solely on children’s oral narratives as contextualized within a developmental continuum which theoretically considers the reciprocal nature of pretend play and storytelling and “... treats them as initially parallel and complementary modes of children’s narrative activity, with at least partly distinct origins and developmental pathways, (that) young children are gradually able to integrate effectively” (Nicolopoulou, 2007, p. 269).

**Definition and Genres**

A recent basic definition of oral narration has been established by Roth (2009):

Oral narration is a type of discourse that involves the comprehension, production, and recall of extended units of speech. Stories and oral exposition (or explanatory discourse) are two major genres of narration. Stories involve characters that engage in goal-directed actions to resolve problems or complications. Early-developing, oral-expository texts consist mainly of scripts and personal narratives that informally describe or recount one’s experiences. (p. 153)
Curenton and Lucas (2007) identified three types, or genres, of oral narratives: autobiographical narrative, scripted narrative, and fictional narrative. Autobiographical narratives ask the child to share a personal experience from the past and should be recognized as culturally influenced by context, relationships, and experiences. Scripted narratives describe routine events which are generalized and familiar, like going to the dentist or making a sand castle. Both autobiographical narratives and scripted narratives are told in the past tense and are examined to assess the ability to construct and describe a series of events or actions in temporal and logical sequence. The third type of narrative genre defined by Curenton and Lucas (2007) is fictional narrative, which usually aligns with the format of a storybook, fairy tale, myth, or fable. Fictional narratives show the ability to create a plot rooted in events which are “psychologically relevant” to the characters in the story.

Sophisticated narratives require the following elements: organization of discourse elements and multiple linguistic propositions. Organization of discourse includes sequence of events, cause-event relationships and structures, and unified text. Multiple linguistic propositions include an introduction, forward-moving events, a logical conclusion, and a monologue (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Roth & Spekman, 1986; see also Roth, 2009).

**Cultural Differences**

Social interactions in the home, school, and community provide context and instruction for the development of young children’s narrating styles. Socially
acquired narrating styles represent culturally embedded values and beliefs; for children, this defines what stories should be about and the manner in which stories should be told (Gee, 1989). Accordingly, children’s oral narrative styles will be based on their social, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds (McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Curenton, 2006; Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Regarding narrative assessment, when the assessor’s judgment and the child’s narrative style differ, the assessor must recognize differing cultural narrating traditions and adjust accordingly. The narrative productions of a child should be recognized as a holistic narrative contextualized within the child’s social, cultural, and socio-economic background. When the assessor’s perspective and judgment are rooted in a European narrating style and tradition, great attention is required to assure that narratives of children with differing cultural narrative styles are not assessed on a deficit scale.

Narrative assessment has traditionally been situated within the European cultural narrating style. Based on the model associated with Aristotle, stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Constructed to revolve around a single episodic event, the actions usually follow a linear temporal sequence. Stories, or narratives, are typically monologues in which the narrator is responsible for the communication of the entire story to the listener. In the European cultural narrating style, the narrator’s perspective and perception of the story are central to the purpose and production (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; McCabe, 1997; McCabe & Bliss, 2003). While the European cultural narrating style is considered an
historical tradition, contemporary narrative assessment must expand to include differing cultural narrative styles.

African cultural narrative style is generally organized around a theme and requires several episodes or multiple events to carry the theme (McCabe, 1997). Featuring circular temporal design or pattern where past, present, and future episodes are interwoven (Champion, 1998), African cultural narrative style often utilizes joint-storytelling and welcomes audience contributions to the story. Narrator call and audience response invites listeners to provide evaluative comments and details as the story is being created. For this reason, audience silence may indicate boredom or rejection to the narrator (Currenton & Lucas, 2007; McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

Asian cultural narrative style is marked by its overall concise nature in which narratives function as intuitive communication and a high degree of importance is placed on non-verbal information (Currenton & Lucas, 2007). Comprehension is considered the responsibility of the listener, as there is a cultural standard of brevity (Minami & McCabe, 1991). Assessor awareness of the taboo surrounding verbosity is important, as children may be even less verbal than usual in the presence of adults (Currenton & Lucas, 2007; McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

Constructed to revolve around multiple characters and not restricted by temporal linear sequence, Latino cultural narrative style is usually connected by an over-arching theme (Melzi, 2000). Latino cultural narratives may feature
numerous evaluative commentaries and a high level of internal state talk concerning the emotions of the characters (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

Assessors of young children’s narratives may be theoretically aware of the underlying values of narrative style embedded in their personal concept of a sophisticated narrative. Assessors and educators educated in the United States must be highly cognizant of their traditional European North American formal education and the related problematic stance when considering cultural differences in young children’s narrative productions. Research demonstrates that the interpretation of assessment data is highly affected by the values, beliefs, and language of teachers (Johnston & Rogers, 2002). Certainly, assessors, educators, and teachers of young children need to be knowledgeable about the different types of assessment devices for narrative, like screening, diagnostic, and progress-monitoring (Walpole & McKenna, 2004). However, I believe that knowledge and skill in assessing narrative must also include assessor-competence in diverse cultural narratives styles.

As cultural sensitivity in curriculum and instruction is a critical factor of language- and literacy-rich classrooms, both cultural and linguistic diversity must be present to be considered as developmentally appropriate practice. Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is recognized as the fundamental basis for methods in which instruction is developmentally appropriate for the age of the children involved in the instructional group and is implemented with
specific focus upon the diverse and unique needs and developmental progress of each child (NAEYC, 2009). Beyond awareness, I recommend that assessor competency in diverse cultural narrative and linguistic styles should be considered a standard of developmentally appropriate practice.

**Traditional Frameworks for Assessment of Narrative**

Scholars agree that the study of narrative development has been focused on the organization and structure of the narrative (macro-level) and grammatical and semantic elements of the narrative (micro-level) (Currenton & Lucas, 2007; Gee, 1986; McCabe & Peterson, 1991a; Roth, 2009). Macro-analysis examines text meaning and structure as a connected discourse by utilizing text grammar approaches like story grammar (Groth & Darling, 2001; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1983, 1997; Stein & Glenn, 1979) and high-point analysis (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletsky, 1976). Macro-analysis approaches are mainly centered on the basic elements of a story, such as sequence of events and episodes. Micro-analysis examines narratives at the word, phrase, and sentence level. In micro-analysis, measures of productivity – like total number of words and length of utterance, and measures of grammatical organization – such as complexity, accuracy, and linguistic cohesion, are analyzed.

Because children grow in narrative development and increasingly demonstrate more sophisticated abilities to use decontextualized language and events within the basic elements of a story (Nicolopoulou, 2007; Pellegrini & Galda, 2001; Roth, 2009), both the macro-analysis and micro-analysis
approaches are most often utilized to investigate children’s narrative productions. This traditional approach of macro-analysis and micro-analysis allows children’s oral narratives to be assessed at two different, yet complementary, structural levels resulting in a dual framework. Typically combined, they analyze several features of narrative assessment like macro-analysis of story grammar and micro-analysis of grammatical unity.

Perhaps the best known dual framework of macro-analysis and micro-analysis is within the work of McCabe and associated researchers (McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Identified as the Narrative Assessment Profile (NAP) (McCabe & Bliss, 2003), this framework incorporates components of high point analysis (Labov, 1972) by utilizing modes of “informativeness” to evaluate discourse coherence. The Narrative Assessment Profile includes six aspects of discourse coherence structure:

Macrostructure

- Topic maintenance
- Event sequencing
- Informativeness

Microstructure

- Referencing
- Conjunctive cohesion
- Fluency
The McCabe and Bliss (2003) Narrative Assessment Profile has fully developed the aspects of discourse coherence at both the macro- and micro-levels. At the macrostructure level (macro-analysis), topic maintenance indicates how effectively all utterances relate to a central topic by expansion, continuation, or contradiction. Utterances that do not sustain a topic may be “irrelevant, tangential, vague, or ambiguous” (p. 15). Event Sequencing refers to the organization of events in order as either chronological or logical sequence. Usually the speaker orders the events in a narrative as reflecting real-life occurrence. A variation of this may occur if the narrator informs the listener that a deviation is in order; the deviation may be expressed directly or interwoven into the presentation. Leapfrogging, the violation of sequential action or event(s), may be characterized by events which violate the chronological order or omit important events and ultimately produce an incoherent narrative.

Informativeness is associated with the process of making sense of discourse coherence by relating to components of development and elaboration. Informativeness includes three aspects of completeness: sufficient information; embellishment; and description, action, and evaluation (Labov, 1972). Sufficient information enables the listener to make sense of the narrative. Embellishment contributes to increased understanding and is highly related to cultural narrative style. Description relates to attributions of people and objects through use of adjectives and adverbs (“the green grass”), while actions refer to events (“she slid across the sidewalk”). Evaluation is crucial as it makes the listener aware of
the speaker’s or the character’s emotions ("I cried because I thought it was 
really sad").

Within the microstructure level (micro-analysis), referencing refers to the 
necessary information about characters or individuals, characteristics, and events 
before pronoun use is presented. Proper use of pronouns enables the listener to 
identify individuals, settings and locations, and actions and events correctly. 
Conjunctive cohesion addresses words (and, then, because, so, but) or phrases 
which connect utterances and events by interweaving ideas and discourse 
functions. Conjunctive cohesion helps the listener to understand relationships 
between the narrator’s utterances. While issues of coordination, temporal 
connections, causality, enabling, and disjuncture are common cohesive links, 
McCabe and Peterson (1991a) further explain four uses of conjunctives as 
devices. These four devices of conjunctive cohesion are beginnings, endings, 
change of focus, and chronology of violation.

Examples of each are:

- *Beginnings* initiate a narrative. An examiner may suggest, “I suppose 
you saw waves in the ocean.” The child might say, “*But,* I felt some 
rocks.”

- *Endings* indicate the end of a narrative, such as “*So,* now the birds are 
all gone.”
• *Change of focus* suggests an interruption of the established temporal order of events to add more information. The child might say, “And then we all left, but you know what?”

• *Chronology violation* indicates that a specific sequential organization of events will be violated, as in “I went to the dentist, but before that I saw a clown in the store.”

The final aspect of discourse coherence at the microstructure level is fluency. Fluency refers to the flow of lexical and phrasal utterances. Interruptions in children’s utterances, such as false starts, decrease the accuracy of the narrative and reduce the listener’s understanding. False starts may manifest as “… the dentist, he said... uh...uh... he meant.” Other dysfluencies include internal corrections (“I went in the tent ... went to the fair.”) and repetitions (We touched the clown in the tent, and we *touched the clown*.).

Following the clinical format outlined by McCabe and Bliss in NAP (2003), a narrative is elicited, transcribed, and then questions are asked and applied to the child’s narrative. The consideration of profile dimensions – topic maintenance, event sequencing, informativeness, referencing, conjunctive cohesion, and fluency – identify a child’s areas of narrative strengths and weaknesses. Quantitative forms of the NAP scoring procedure are available, but for the qualitative purposes of many studies, the use of specific numerical standards would not be appropriate. McCabe and Bliss recommend viewing the narrative as a whole in order to focus on the overall length and scope of the
child’s narrative production while retaining the integrity of the context, age, gender, and disposition of the child. Therefore, the qualitative study designs with corresponding categories are frequently utilized for the NAP. Qualitative categories of NAP include: appropriate; inappropriate; variable; and need further study. (Appendix A).

The dual framework of macro-analysis and micro-analysis is well respected and traditionally used by researchers (McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Trionfi & Reese, 2009) but “… results in other important features of narratives, such as psychological causation, being overlooked” (Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 379). To remedy the absence of both psychological causation and stylistic diversity in the assessment of narratives of young children, Curenton and Lucas (2007) have created a more culturally appropriate assessment framework which they identify as the Story Pyramid Framework.

While still recognizing the value of traditional macro-analysis and micro-analysis features of narrative assessment, like story-grammar and grammatical unity, Curenton and Lucas (2007) describe their expanded narrative assessment framework as a story pyramid concept that:

... will elevate all features to an equal level of prominence during assessment. Although we are proposing a new framework for approaching narrative assessment, we are by no means suggesting that the traditional features of narratives be discarded. On the contrary, we argue that these traditional measures maintain their level of importance, but suggest that
other features of narratives be elevated to a similar level of importance to facilitate a denser, more sophisticated and culturally-sensitive assessment of narrative. Hence we propose a Story Pyramid Framework for assessing young children’s narrative skills. (p. 379)

The Story Pyramid Framework offers advantages over the traditional two-pronged approach of macro-analysis and micro-analysis. Curenton and Lucas (2007) identify the following advantages of the Story Pyramid Framework:

- Allows for richer analysis by recognizing a wider range of narrative features, like language structure, story structure, and psychological structure
- Rests on an interdisciplinary literature base comprised of psychological and educational research on cultural traditions and psychological causation in narratives
- Offers a more culturally sensitive perspective for considering narratives while still utilizing traditional measures of narrative assessment
- Views a child’s narrative as a holistic unit which is more valid in determining strengths and weaknesses of particular features
- Encourages the design and implementation of specific narrative intervention unique to the child, ensuring better intervention outcomes (p. 379-380).

The Story Pyramid Framework orients the assessor to consider the child’s cultural narrative traditions and styles along with traditional features of
narratives like story structure and language structure. When assessing young children’s narrative skills, cultural traditions in narrating style have direct implications for the organization of a child’s narrative or story, the function of grammar, and the creation and development of character (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

It is apparent to me that the story pyramid design of the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) is a well constructed framework for use in assessing the narratives of young children who participate in imaginary companion play. I believe that because the Story Pyramid Framework recognizes language structure, story structure, and psychological structure, it offers a more expansive understanding of young children’s imagination, context, and culture. Conducting research leading to beneficial application for developing children’s symbolic imagination, mature pretend play, and strong narrative skills is important, and I can see how the Story Pyramid Framework emphasizes the developmental value of sound research and practice which combines components of pretend play and narrative skill. For these reasons, I am adopting the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) (Appendix B) as the central framework for the assessment of children’s narratives within my study, and a thorough discussion follows. Because the Story Pyramid Framework adopts and encompasses traditional macrostructure (macro-analysis) and microstructure (micro-analysis) features of analysis, some areas of the following detailed text discussing the Story Pyramid Framework will overlap text previously discussed.
The Story Pyramid Framework Language Structure:

The Basic Level of the Story Pyramid Framework

Language structure provides the basic level of the Story Pyramid Framework and deals with children’s ability to aptly interlace grammatical features and to utilize specific and appropriate lexicon, including grammatical complexity and vocabulary. Grammatical complexity “weaves the story together and makes the ideas/events vivid and clear” (Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 389).

Following the transcription of narrative, the text must be divided into language units called communication units or C-units. C-units allow the researcher to break down the narrative into grammatical units and are traditionally associated with significant correlation between C-unit length and age of the child (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Located within the subject-predicate clause, C-units are based on clausal design. Thus, the C-unit is comprised of either an independent clause or an independent clause and its related dependent clause.

Assessment measures of grammatical complexity can be established by the number of C-units included in a narrative and by the average number of words per C-unit, known as the mean length of C-unit (MLCU). The MCLU establishes an index by dividing the total number of words per C-unit by the total number of C-units in the narrative. This index is useful for determining how effectively a child has constructed the clauses. For example, a C-unit comprised
of “the dog barks” is less complex than the C-unit “the dog barks loudly all night.”

In combination with measures of grammatical complexity, determining how the clause is handled or modified within the narrative is necessary. This identifies the type of grammatical features and clausal elements utilized in modification of the clause. An appropriate assessment method is known as literate language features (LLF) and includes devices like expanded noun phrases, adverbs, conjunctions, and mental/linguistic verbs (Curenton & Justice, 2004; Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001). Determining the LLF in children’s narratives is achieved by dividing the number of each feature by the total number of C-units.

Based on studies inclusive of dialect, like African American English (AAE) (Smith, Lee, & McDade, 2001), appropriate assessment measures for grammatical complexity in multi-cultural and multi-linguistic children’s narratives must be developed and utilized. Curenton and Lucas (2007) offer specific guidelines for appropriate multi-linguistic assessment measures: “Because clinicians must measure language abilities in multicultural and multi-linguistic populations, the guidelines for counting and segmenting C-units must be inclusive of non-standard forms of English to ensure an unbiased narrative assessment” (p. 391).

C-units have functioned as a reliable and unbiased assessment marker for children with cultural and/or linguistic diversity as demonstrated by research of
children’s language skills evident in their narratives (Smith, Lee, & McDade, 2001). Specific language communities create systems of grammatical governance, like Standard American English and African American English. Cultural and linguistic variations among language systems are viewed as language differences and not language deficiency.

Lexical diversity is a “measure of expressive vocabulary size and includes indicators of vocabulary that children use in their narratives” (Current & Lucas, 2007, p. 393). Traditionally, the type-token ratio (TTR) (Watkins, Kelly, Harbers, & Hollins, 1995) is the preferred measure of lexical diversity and is calculated by constructing a ratio of the total number of different words versus the total number of words in a child’s narrative. Establishing the total number of different words (NDW) (Miller, 1991) requires that utterance length be controlled for (Trionfi & Reese, 2009) to avoid functioning as simply a measure of verbosity. Measures of how children use words, like verbs and unusual words, can serve as a statement of lexical diversity in children’s narratives. Both grammatical complexity and lexical diversity can be calculated and utilized as quantitative or qualitative measures within the language structure basic level of the Story Pyramid Framework.

**The Level of the Story Pyramid Framework that Increases Listener Comprehension of Narrative**

Story structure in the Story Pyramid Framework assists the listener in comprehending the narrative by orally organizing the story events in a temporal,
spatial, and causal presentation. Several traditional systems exist; all systems offer approaches utilizing a categorical hierarchy ranging from minimally developed to highly developed narrative. Although systems can be used singly, traditionally story structure combinations are used or linked with other organizational frameworks.

Applebee’s Narrative Levels (Applebee, 1978) includes recognition of both the centering strategy (the main theme of the story) and the chaining strategy (the connection of story events). Applebee identified six narrative levels which range from simple to complex along a narrative hierarchy. These levels are:

- Heaps: events or ideas not linked by temporal or causal means
- Sequences: ideas or events showing temporal but not causal relatedness
- Primitive narratives: concrete core with connected situational idea or event
- Unfocused chains: main characters who experience related actions or events but not centered on the main topic
- Focused chains: main central character with related events but no central theme
- True narrative: has a theme, central character, and events that are centered upon core idea or event (Applebee, 1978; See also Curenton & Lucas, 2007)
Perhaps the most popular measure of narrative/story analysis is the story grammar method for assessing fictional narratives. Highly appropriate for assessing children’s fictional stories that include a protagonist, goals for action, and corresponding goal-driven action, story grammar might be more applicable for primary, school-aged children’s narratives, as opposed to preschool children’s narratives. Primary children’s narratives include more sophisticated use of story grammar, like setting, problem, internal response, internal plan, attempt, consequences, resolution, and ending (Stein & Glenn, 1979).

Another popular analysis for narrative is the high point analysis (Labov, 1972). Best aligned to autobiographical or fictional narratives, high point analysis marks six narrative features which are: introductor, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. McCabe (McCabe, 1997; McCabe & Peterson, 1991a) expanded Labov’s (1972) concept of high point analysis with the inclusion of classification by structural patterns which included:

- Classic: most complex and features a climax, evaluation, and resolution
- End-at-high-point: concludes with unresolved climax
- Leapfrog: jumps among inter-related events but excludes main events
- Chronological: describes a sequence of temporally related events which are not necessarily temporally connected
- Two event narrative: circles same two events and lacks climax
- Disoriented narrative: lacks comprehension
The analysis of scripted narratives is distinct from autobiographical or fictional story-like narratives due to the purpose of scripted narrative. Curenton & Lucas (2007) wrote of this difference: “Scripts are used to assess children’s ability to logically describe the sequence of a repeated, generalized event (and) the goal of a scripted narrative is to instruct” (p. 398). Assessment of narrative scripts must evaluate temporal order, key routine events, and level of detail (Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997).

**The Level of the Story Pyramid Framework Demonstrating the Social-Cognitive Component of Narrative**

The psychological structure of the Story Pyramid Framework deals with the social-cognitive component of narratives. Typically, the social-cognitive features of narratives have not been recognized or formally addressed within assessment frameworks. The psychological structure demonstrates children’s emotional understanding of the feelings, thoughts, mental states, and goals of the characters (Curenton & Lucas, 2007). Internal state and story landscapes comprise the social-cognitive component of narratives.

Internal state is indicated by calculating the frequency and rate of children’s use of internal state words which relate to emotions, intentions, motives, desires, etc. The frequency and rate of internal state words increase with age and maturity as children begin to employ causal explanations to identify and relate a character’s internal state (Curenton & Justice, 2004). For example, a
statement such as “My brother was worried *because* the store man saw him touching all the candy” contains both the character’s internal state (worried) and a causal explanation (the store man saw him touching all the candy).

Children’s use of internal state terms begins slowly and increases with age and narrative maturity. Often, an additional measure of psychological structure is combined with internal state term measures. On its own or combined with internal state terms, story landscapes (Bruner, 1986) can assess psychological causation in a narrative. According to Bruner (1986), all stories are comprised of two landscapes, the action landscape and the consciousness landscape. The action landscape contains information about the plot, setting, and events and focuses on what is happening. The consciousness landscape contains information about the character’s psychological states and revolves around motives and why events are happening. Through the explanations and mental states of the character, the consciousness landscape is formed in the narrative. Sophisticated narratives unite the two landscapes, but preschool children may have difficulty describing the inner thoughts and motives of a character just as they often struggle with identifying internal state terms.

In response to preschoolers’ developmental trend with difficulty recognizing and expressing thoughts, motives, and internal state markers of characters, Curenton (2004) developed a specific coding device to assess young children’s oral stories according to Bruner’s (1986) theory of action and consciousness landscapes. Based on the story *Frog, Where Are You?* (Meyer,
1969), and requiring children to discuss both the plot and the character’s motives and internal states, Curenton reported a strong developmental trend. In discussing both the plot and the character’s motives and internal states, 5% of 3-year-old children constructed a narrative which described the character’s consciousness; 56% of 4-year-olds and 67% of 5-year-old children addressed the character’s motives and internal states (Curenton, 2004; see also Curenton & Lucas, 2007). Narrative constructions which unite plot, characters’ motives, and internal states increased accordingly with the age of the narrators; I consider this to be a firm indication of a developmental trend according to Bruner’s (1986) theory of action and consciousness landscapes. I consider the developmental trend uniting the action and consciousness landscapes as adding credibility for the social-cognitive component, or psychological causation, of narrative within the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

I believe that the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) offers the framework best aligned to my study investigating the narrative skills of young children with imaginary companions. Going beyond the traditional macro-analysis and micro-analysis and including the socio-cognitive component of narratives will consider the child’s narrative as a holistic unit. The Story Pyramid Framework also encourages a more culturally appropriate perspective for children’s diverse narrative styles. Ultimately, I expect that the Story Pyramid Framework may encourage theoretical implications for the manner in which young children with imaginary companions craft their stories, fashion grammar
with their stories, and construct character development. Therefore, I have selected the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) (see Appendix B), which includes the narrative features of language structure, story structure, and psychological structure as the operating narrative assessment framework for my study design.
Recent research indicates that young children who participate in imaginary companion play demonstrate stronger narrative skills than children who do not participate in imaginary companion play (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Children’s narrative skills are considered an important component of reading success (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Hicks, 1991; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaugency, 2010). Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that children who participate in imaginary companion play may develop strong reading skills during their formal primary school experience.

Currently, play theorists identify imaginary companion play as a sustained and sophisticated type of role play (Harris, 2000). Over time, imaginary companion play may become richly detailed, more abstract, and highly complex (Bouldin, 2006; Singer & Singer, 1990; Spitz, 2006; Taylor, 1999). In fact, imaginary companion play is conceptualized as perhaps the most complex expression of play in early childhood (Klaussen & Passman, 2007; Triofi & Reese, 2009). Likewise, theorists and scholars identify narrative, specifically decontextualized language, as one of the richest and most highly detailed linguistic expressions in early childhood (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Snow, 1983).
The central purpose of my investigation was to extend existing research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating children’s narrative skills. This study allowed children’s descriptions of imaginary companion play, children’s play and narrative behaviors, and children’s narrative productions to be observed, recorded, and assessed.

To begin Chapter 3, I introduce a statement of qualitative research and the detailed rationale that demonstrates the appropriate connection between qualitative research and my study questions and goals. In the main body of Chapter 3, I organize my presentation in three sections: paradigm, methodology, and design of the study. A detailed discussion of qualitative research is followed by a statement of my particular paradigm including: belief about the nature of knowledge, methodological approach, and criteria of validity. Within the section discussing methodology the following topics are presented and discussed: the genre of narrative research (both analysis of narrative and narrative analysis), case study approach, and the genre of assessment of narratives. Chapter 3 closes with a discussion of the design of the study which includes a description of specific methodology, tools, and protocols.

**Qualitative Research as an Introduction**

In conducting and writing this study, it was my intention to gain a rich and deep understanding of young children’s imaginary companion play, explore the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills, and extend prior research of the narrative skills of
young children who participate in imaginary companion play. Researchers often choose field research contexts and designs when uncovering rich, detailed information and lived-experience of the participants as the goal (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Observation, interaction, and shared discourse are preferred modes of inquiry to better understand a particular phenomenon like imaginary companion play. As a researcher, operating with participants within the natural, daily context of experience literally takes one from the front row theater seat onto the stage with the actors. The researcher is then not restricted by a limited view but rather acts and interacts with participants in a personal manner.

Qualitative researchers employ a wide variety of empirical materials and practices, such as case study, life story or experience, interviews, artifacts, and texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hatch, 2002). Utilizing these empirical materials and practices in an interconnected interpretation allows researchers to maximize their understanding of the phenomenon, as qualitative methods often prove more responsive and engaging than quantitative methods during critical analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Jupp, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1984). I therefore chose qualitative methods as they offered an appropriate fit and logical opportunity for generating a better understanding of young children’s imaginary companion play, developmental benefits of such play for narrative skills, and narrative productions. In particular, I expected that qualitative methods would offer an up-close and in-depth investigation by connecting participants’
experiences with the research questions on which this study was based.

Research questions included:

- What is imaginary companion play?
- What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?
- What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills?
- What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children?

I anticipated that exploratory, descriptive qualitative research methods would best enable me to investigate the research questions of this study and accomplish the study goals. Exploratory design (Hancock & Algozinne, 2006) is a necessary initial step when the findings of such research will be utilized to guide policy, inform practice, and orient additional future research in the education of young children. The fieldwork and collection of data in an exploratory design serve as the launching point for future research consideration and must remain directly connected the goals of the study. The goals of this study were: to extend prior research dealing with imaginary companion play; to explore potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills; and extend prior research of the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play. For exploratory qualitative research to be most effective in answering study questions and accomplishing study goals, this research was conducted with a deep understanding of my personal paradigm.
Paradigm: How I “See”

As a researcher, my view of the world has direct bearing upon my selection of paradigm; that paradigm will effectively determine my research questions, methods and the type of knowledge garnered by such methods. Hughes (2004) has defined paradigm as a way to “see” the world and organize it into a coherent whole; paradigm is more than a theory. Each paradigm is a specific collection of beliefs about knowledge and about our relationships with knowledge, together with practices based upon those beliefs. Any particular paradigm has three elements:

- A belief about the nature of knowledge; what it means to say that we know something
- A methodology; what to investigate, how to investigate it, what to measure or assess, and how to do it (methodological approach)
- Criteria of validity; how to judge someone’s claim to know something.” (p. 31-32).

These three elements – nature of knowledge, methodological approach, and criteria of validity – comprise my paradigm and are discussed throughout the following section of this chapter.

Paradigm: The Nature of Knowledge

My ideas about the nature of knowledge and learning are drawn from my experiences as a parent, teacher, and friend of children. I enjoyed a close, participant-perspective of children’s lives which, over the course of thirty years of
parenting and eighteen years of teaching, directly and profoundly impacted my view of childhood. Closely aligned with the definition statement issued by the United Nation’s Convention of the Rights of the Child and contemporary scholars (Armstrong, 2006; Brooker, 2004; Folque, 2010), I believe that children:

- Are full citizens and autonomous human beings
- Are powerfully forming their identities
- Are psychologically and linguistically competent
- Able to express their own thoughts and ideas
- Have a right to express their views and perspectives
- Can provide thoughtful and valuable contributions to decision making
- Have a right to care and protection from harm.

Within the contexts of the home and classroom, I came to view children as “competent social actors” and learning as “… no longer perceived as an input/output (teaching/learning) process, but rather as a dialogical process occurring as children and adults together and jointly create meanings” (Folque, 2010, p.240-241). Jointly engaging in dialogues in both formal and informal contexts and listening to children’s narratives of their experiences repeatedly demonstrated the connection between discourse, phenomena, and learning. This connection became a critical point for me; it is the lived-experience which informs my concept of the nature of knowledge.

I believe that the nature of knowledge is grounded in discovery and develops within relational processes. Closely aligned with poststructuralism, I
recognize that understanding (knowledge) is relational; therefore, it is within a system of relationships that a phenomenon like imaginary companion play derives its contextualized meaning. I try to envision the ways singular elements within a system of relationships may interact with other elements to develop more dynamic learning and integrative meaning. This practice regarding the nature of knowledge has encouraged me to consider that the phenomena of young children’s imaginary companion play and the development of narrative skills warrant closer study that focuses on the processes of learning. In good company, I join other researchers as an advocate for research which focuses on the processes of young children’s learning (Armstrong, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, Newcome, & deVilliers, 2005; Roskos & Christie, 2011).

**Paradigm: The Theoretical Frame and Abstract Explanation**

My study is a response to the call for research topics which connect play and literacy and contribute to a better understanding of the play-literacy relationship applicable to early childhood education. Centered upon the role of play in the development of cognitive-linguistic skills contributing to literacy, my research study will contribute to the knowledge of both play and literacy to better describe the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play and the possible role of imaginary companion play in the development of young children’s narrative skills.

Demonstrating a self-critical awareness of the process of fair research (Edwards, 2004) required that I foreground my theoretical stance and
understanding as it related to this study. Often identified as “self-reflexivity,” this foregrounding is an important part of researcher responsibility as it involves “deconstructing the ways on which our desires shape the texts we produce” (Grieshaber, 2004). Self-reflexivity is usually associated with the analysis of research (Edwards, 2004; Grieshaber, 2004), but I believe that critical awareness of self-reflexivity must be an ongoing understanding in every step of the research process. Therefore, the statement and explanation of my theoretical positions will be clearly explained to the reader as they grounded each step of the research process. I selected several theoretical frameworks, which, when combined, offer a theoretical frame and abstract explanation allowing the occurrence of imaginary companion play, narrative behaviors, and narrative productions of young children to be observed, recorded, and analyzed.

In general, I contextualized my study within the “play-literacy nexus,” where the narrative skills of young children with imaginary companions could be investigated inside the “… space where (children’s) play, language, and emerging literacy behaviors converge and interact” (Roskos & Christie, 2011, p.204). To function theoretically within the context of Roskos and Christie’s (2011) “play-literacy nexus,” I believed a well-aligned hypothesis viewing play and narrative as closely interwoven was appropriate. Nicolopoulou (2007, p.269) proposed: … an approach to understanding the developmental relationship between pretend play and storytelling (that) treats them as initially parallel and complementary modes of children’s narrative activity, with at least partly
distinct origins and developmental pathways, that young children are gradually able to integrate effectively. Children’s play and narrative should not be artificially separated or studied in mutual isolation, but should be viewed as closely intertwined, and often overlapping, forms of socially situated symbolic action. p.268

Nicolopoulou’s (2007) hypothesis of the developmental relationship between pretend play and storytelling is a solid base upon which to study the complex, dynamic nature of children’s imaginary companion play and narrative skills and respects the theoretical connection set forth in Roskos and Christie’s (2011) “play-literacy nexus.”

To effectively operate within the “play-literacy nexus,” (Roskos & Christie, 2011) required a perspective regarding young children’s literacy development. The phrase “framework for emergent literacy” has been defined as a model or viewpoint for a perspective which aids in the understanding of children who are in the period of time during which they develop a wide variety of emergent literacy knowledge and skills. Rhyner, Haebig, and West (2009) describe frameworks of the emergent literacy stage which they categorize according to three main perspectives: the developmental perspective, the components perspective, and the child and environmental influences perspective. While the developmental perspective focuses on a general sequence in acquisition of emergent literacy knowledge and skills, I believed that combining Rhyner, Haebig, and West’s (2009) components perspective and the child/environmental
perspective would offer a sound joint perspective for exploring the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play. With its focus on the specific knowledge and skills that mark the emergent literacy process, oral language and code-related skills are recognized as the foundation for literacy within the components perspective. Critical to my study was the specific components framework of Storch and Whitehurst (2002), who identify the components of oral language skills as:

- Semantic knowledge (word knowledge, expressive and receptive vocabulary)
- Syntactic knowledge (knowledge of word order and grammatical rules)
- Narrative discourse (telling a story)
- Conceptual knowledge (knowledge of the world)

In complex interrelation, the components of oral language skills manifest in children’s narratives and represent main focus areas for study when observing, collecting, and assessing children’s narratives.

Additionally, Rhyner, Haebig, and West’s (2009) child and environmental influences perspective recognizes that the influence of the child and other developmental factors may function separately or in some reciprocal or complex relationship affecting the child’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills. A phenomenological study of children who participate in imaginary companion play could be contextualized within the child and environmental influences perspective to explore children’s narrative skills. I believed that adopting this perspective
would recognize the ownership of the imaginary companion by the child and allow for consideration of the social interaction with the imaginary companion as decontextualized language. Also, parent and child characteristics, play and literacy environments, and parent-child relationships could be considered as they influence a child’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills – specifically narrative skills.

In summary, I adopted (these elements?) as a basis for narrative assessment in my study design:

- the theoretical connection set forth in Roskos and Christie’s (2011) “play-literacy nexus”
- Nicolopoulou’s (2007) working hypothesis of the developmental relationship between pretend play and storytelling as the base upon which to study the reciprocal, dynamic nature of children’s imaginary companion play and narrative skills
- a multi-layered emergent literacy theory utilizing the components perspective, the child and environmental influences perspective (Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009) and the oral language skills model (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002)

**Paradigm: Dynamic-Systems as a Methodological Approach**

The goals of this study were: to extend existing research dealing with imaginary companion play; to explore potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills; and extend prior
research of the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play. Viewing play and narrative as closely interwoven forms of socially situated symbolic action with partially distinct pathways that merge in late early childhood development, I selected a dynamic systems approach as appropriate for my study methodology.

Dynamic skills theory Fischer & Immordino-Yang, (2002) demonstrates: ... dual emphases- on skills, their organization and relationship to the social and emotional context, and on dynamic constructivism, in which skill organizations vary dynamically according to specifiable growth processes and control parameters. This combination of approaches represents a way to simultaneously describe development as an overarching set of large-scale changes while keeping sight of the incremental, daily, even minute-to-minute dynamics that show much of the order within this variation. The goal is to unpack without dissecting, to simplify, and clarify in a useful way that does not over-simplify. (p. 12)

Dynamic systems theorists emphasize the processes of cognitive development, trajectory of change, and high variability across people, tasks, and structures (Fischer & Immordino-Yang, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Samuelson, 2002).

As an approach (Lewis, 2000), dynamic systems provide:

[A] framework, using principles of self-organization to explain how novel forms emerge without predetermination and become increasingly complex with development ... Dynamic systems theorists claim that all
developmental outcomes can be explained as the spontaneous emergence of coherent, higher-order forms through recursive interactions among simpler components, the process is called self-organization, and it accounts for growth and novelty throughout the natural world, from organisms to societies to ecosystems to the biosphere itself. According to principles of self-organization, these entities achieve their patterned structure without pre-specification by internal rules or determination by their environments, and human development is just one exemplar of a universal tendency toward higher-order coherence. (p. 36)

I expected that, as diverse phenomena (such as imaginary companion play) and dynamic constructivism (such as narrative skill development) could be modeled within a sole explanatory framework based on principles of self-organization, it would be possible to coordinate a “...wide range of phenomena with a common set of principles” (Lewis, 2000, p.40). A dynamic systems approach would therefore cast the play-literacy relationship in a new light which moves beyond simple constructivism or traditional connectionism theory (Smith & Samuelson, 2002).

The dynamic systems approach to the play-literacy relationship encourages the researcher to consider and explore mutually reinforcing behaviors and skills which may create “webs of developing skills and activities,” pulling cognitive development forward to new levels (Fischer & Immordino-Yang, 2002, p.13). Nicolopoulou’s (2007) hypothesis views play and narrative as closely
interwoven, existing as a developmental relationship between pretend play and storytelling. Experienced as initially parallel and complementary modes of children’s narrative activity, with at least partly distinct origins and developmental pathways, young children are gradually able to integrate pretend play and storytelling effectively. Nicoloupolou’s recommendation is that children’s play and narrative should not be artificially dissected or studied in mutual isolation, but instead should be viewed as closely intertwined, and often overlapping, forms of socially situated symbolic action is supported by dynamic systems theory.

Dynamic systems theorists Fischer and Immordino-Yang (2002) explain:
In a common process, people construct skills by first using two or more distinct, often contradictory skills that co-occur for the same situation. This process is usually social ... (people) explore the co-occurring skills in order to create a new skill, which they apply readily within a content domain but not across domains. As a result, development moves along parallel, independent strands (domains) in a developmental web. The strands are independent; they grow through similar processes and follow a universal scale of predictable developmental levels. (p. 2)

Thus, I anticipated that a dynamic systems approach would allow the gradual integration of imaginary companion play and young children’s narrative skill development to be eventually posited as a single picture of cognitive development and change along a web-like developmental trajectory.
Roskos and Christie (2011) recommend the dynamic-systems approach as a vantage point for exploring play-literacy connections through a multiple-skills lens while considering and theorizing how play and literacy skills develop simultaneously and interact to form longer developmental trajectories of language and literacy learning. Stepping beyond connectionism, which asks how knowledge is constructed, a dynamic-systems approach asks how knowledge and skills are built and how they change over time (Smith & Samuelson, 2002). I agree with Roskos and Christie (2011) in anticipation that dynamic-systems-based research may reveal precursor skills that are causal links in emergent literacy. Ultimately, perhaps possible innovations like dynamic assessment tools could result from new research on development, learning, and teaching.

**Paradigm: Criteria of Validity**

Scholars and researchers generally identify three common concerns in qualitative research design: feasibility, reflexivity, and validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Edwards, 2004; Hughes, 2004). Feasibility refers to boundary setting, timeline projection, data access, establishing confidentiality measures, and research design modifications (Edwards, 2004). Reflexivity indicates that the researcher is able to conceptualize data analysis as a sustained focus and ongoing activity throughout every stage of the research process while maintaining an acute self-awareness of the researcher’s impact on the study itself (Edwards, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Of the three issues – feasibility, reflexivity, and validity – validity is often met with contradictory meanings within
different research paradigms and frameworks. For this reason, a detailed discussion of validity follows in the remainder of this section, while issues of feasibility and reflexivity are addressed in other sections of Chapter 3.

In qualitative research designs, validity usually assumes a meaning associated with the truth-value of a statement and the ability to provide as stable and clear a conclusion as the research methods can ensure (Edwards, 2004; Hughes, 2004). As a researcher most closely aligned with poststructuralism, my investigation was designed to show how discourses produce phenomena and the ways in which that phenomenon’s meaning and importance is connected with the unique discourse as a context. A poststructuralist researcher would:

[J]udge the validity of knowledge according to the authenticity of the research participants’ voices. However, poststructuralists’ emphasis on the local nature of knowledge means that the limits they place on the validity of knowledge are even stricter than interpretivists. For example, where a structuralist would judge the validity of knowledge by situating it with a grand narrative of progress or development, a poststructuralist would regard something as valid to the extent that it expressed the discourse(s) that produced it. (Hughes, 2004, p. 48)

Therefore, capturing a deep, rich, robust description of the experiences of young children’s imaginary companion play and narrative skill development required a planned process ensuring integrity.
Building integrity is best centered upon the process of triangulation. Triangulation involves viewing the research process from a variety of perspectives. Denzin’s (1989) described four main points of triangulation:

- **Data triangulation**: the use of multiple data sources in a research study
- **Methodological triangulation**: the use of variety of methods to study a single problem
- **Investigator triangulation**: the use of several researchers
- **Theory triangulation**: the use of multiple perspectives to examine and interpret a single set of data (See also Edwards, 2004, p.124-126).

As I was the principle investigator for this study, investigator triangulation was not possible but would be recommended for analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative(s) in future studies. Three main points of triangulation used throughout my study included: data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theory triangulation.

In this study, data triangulation involved the use of multiple sources of data, such as: interviews, narrative productions, dramatic productions, artistic production artifacts, and observations. Child-participant and parent-participant interviews yielded deep, rich descriptions of imaginary companion play, pretend play practices, and narrative behaviors. Live recordings of narrative productions were transcribed into written text and served as documents for analysis, as did dramatic productions transcribed to text. Artistic productions, classified as artistic artifacts, were accompanied by child-participants’ rich descriptions and served as
documents for analysis. Observation notes of child-participant actions and behaviors provided additional information and supporting details. Researcher reflective journal entries offered contextual references. These multiple data sources contributed to data triangulation (Glesne, 2006) and are considered a significant strength in the study. Methodological triangulation utilized analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative approaches.

While data, methodological, and investigator triangulation have become standard modes of triangulation, theory triangulation remains challenging as it asks researchers to consider alternative explanations and interpretations of the data. However, a measure of authenticity, like investigating a range of experiences to offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, could invite alternative explanations and interpretations of data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Establishing a theoretical paradigm, I adopted several critical theories including:

- the theoretical connection set forth in Roskos and Christie’s (2011) “play-literacy nexus”
- Nicolopoulou’s (2007) working hypothesis of the developmental relationship between pretend play and storytelling as the base upon which to study the reciprocal, dynamic nature of children’s imaginary companion play and narrative skills
- a multi-layered emergent literacy theory utilizing the components perspective, the child and environmental influences perspective
(Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009) and the oral language skills model (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

I therefore considered the triangulation of these theories to be the surest way to broaden the theoretical base and contribute to the field of study, especially when considering the play-literacy interface. Scholars have called for research which informs the future (Bruner, 1990; Roskos & Christie, 2004), investigates the “play-literacy nexus” (Roskos & Christie, 2011), and pushes the drive toward empirical validity (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, Newcome, & deVilliers, 2005).

Three main points of triangulation (Denzin, 1989), data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theory triangulation (See also Edwards, 2004, p.124-126) were all utilized in my study. As a researcher demonstrating a high degree of integrity, I brought balance to the issues of feasibility, practiced reflexivity, and sought validity to construct a rigorous, qualitative research design.

**Methodology: Narrative Research**

In the landmark work *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* regarding two different modes of thought – narrative and non-narrative – Bruner (1986) explores the possibility that genre may be a way by which speakers construct events in real-life and fictional contexts. Thus for Bruner, genre, either narrative or non-narrative, is not simply an element in literary interpretation but an absolutely “...essential component of the cognitive and linguistic functions in
which individuals represent events” (See Hicks, 1991, p. 57). Within the representation of events, Bruner (1996) states that it is:

...impossible to distinguish sharply what is a narrative mode of thought and what is a narrative ‘text’ or discourse. Each gives form to the other, just as thought becomes inextricable from the language that expresses it and eventually shapes it. (p. 132)

Therefore, reflecting both the autonomy of narrative and non-narrative modes and the interface between the “landscape of action” and the “landscape of consciousness” (Bruner, 1986), a successful narrative expresses an individual’s unique experience by the integration of these two distinct landscapes (See Nicolopoulou, 2006). As a result, narratives are a means of structuring events in both the contexts of reality and fiction.

Stories that produce new knowledge or understanding within the field of study are referred to as narrative research. Narrative research as a research strategy is grounded in the theoretical explanations of Bruner’s landscapes (1986, 1996) and Bakhtin’s speech genres (1986). Utilized extensively by scholars to understand human experience or phenomenon (Fivush & Haden, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995), narrative research offers researchers an intimate perspective through the spoken and written words of participants’ stories.

Multiple forms of narrative research are used to gather the stories and lived experiences of the study participants. Structured and semi-structured
interviews, journals, statement production activities, improvisational dramatic scenes, and art-based activities all offer opportunities for participants to share oral and written narratives of their experiences. These established modes of inquiry are well-suited to narrative research designs of two types – descriptive and explanatory. While descriptive research seeks to uncover a deep, rich description of participants’ experience through personal narratives, explanatory research is more concerned with revealing the events and motivations that caused an event or phenomena (Polkinghorne, 1988). As my research study was designed to gather the personal, rich descriptions of young children’s imaginary companion play and children’s narratives according to narrative production tasks, descriptive narrative research was appropriate.

The field of study surrounding the analysis of narrative research is complicated by the often ambiguous terms which identify, label, and define the analysis process. The analysis of narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995) examines narratives with a “who-what-when-where-why” intent and is mainly accomplished by the use of well-crafted prompt questions and savvy interviewing techniques which lead the participant to openly share their experiences. From participants’ stories, the appearance and frequency of categories and themes emerge which may inform existing knowledge and theory and/or generate alternative theory production. Occurring both within and across case studies, researchers seek to develop a deep understanding using analysis of narrative.
Often confused with analysis of narrative, narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) seeks to construct a complete testimony of an individual’s experience or collected individuals’ experiences. Relying on the researcher to recognize and assemble components of initiation, motivation, behavior, change, etc., the resulting analysis may assume a story schema format which tells the full story of an event or phenomenon.

To further complicate the use of labels and terms surrounding the field of narrative research, within the field of early childhood education an approach to understanding and assessing narrative structure is used in order to recognize, collect, and understand young children’s narratives. Termed assessment of narrative, scholars believe that an assessment of narrative structure represents our understanding of the purpose and structure of that narrative. Both written text and oral discourse are made up of linguistic creations of variable lengths which contribute to a single, unified production which can be best understood through the assessment of narrative (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; McCabe & Peterson, 1991a, 1984; Roth, 2009).

My research study relied on strategies aligned with the analysis of narrative approach which asked for deep, rich descriptive narratives of child-participants’ experiences of imaginary companion play. The interview questions were designed to not only encourage the “who-what-when-where” but also the “why-how” in young children’s descriptions in order to expand opportunity to fully develop their stories, make connections between points of information, and
offer their valued contributions. I utilized the analysis of narrative approach in my study design, leading to a better understanding of the imaginary companion play of young children. This research study also included narrative production task activities for child-participants. Focused solely on oral narratives, which include both stories and oral exposition as defined by Roth (2009), young children’s narratives were assessed using an assessment of narrative approach. Both analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative approaches are discussed in the following section.

**Methodology: Analysis of Narrative**

My study included multiple forms of narrative research strategies to elicit and gather the stories and lived experiences of imaginary companion play and the narrative productions of the study participants. Structured and semi-structured interviews, statement production activities, improvisational dramatic scenes, art-based activities, and specific narrative production tasks all offered opportunities for participants to share their experiences and narratives. These established modes of inquiry were well-suited to exploratory, descriptive narrative research that seeks to uncover a deep, rich description of participants’ experience through personal narratives. This section discusses interview structure, guidelines, and concerns associated with interviewing children; following this section, additional discussion deals in depth with narrative production tasks and the assessment of children’s narratives.
Research interviews have been called “structured conversations” between the researcher and the study participant and follow the “drawing up of interview questions informed by the literature review, intentions and goals of the research, and research questions. The research questions will set the structure and content of the interview” (Cannold, 2004, p. 179). Research questions for this study included:

- What is imaginary companion play?
- What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?
- What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills?
- What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children?

These research questions formed the base for constructing the content of the interview questions (and interview guide) necessary to encourage that researcher-participant conversations were “concise and productive” (Cannold, 2004).

Interview questions can be constructed as close-ended or open-ended. Closed-ended questions are typically simple requests with a limited choice of responses, like “What is the color of your imaginary companion’s eyes?,” and situate the control of the response within the scope of the researcher’s agenda. Open-ended questions, such as “What are your imaginary companion’s eyes like?” situate the orchestration of the response in the hands of the participant and:
[E]nable a more varied and in-depth participant response and so are more suited to generating (rather than confirming) theory. Open-ended questioning gives participants the freedom to answer questions as they wish, or even reshape questions that betray a researcher’s misunderstanding or previous interview testimony or make unwarranted assumptions. (Cannold, 2004, p. 180)

Open-ended questions, by the very nature of their term, indicate a less controlled and predictable nature of responses; participant responses to open-ended questions are more likely to challenge the traditional theoretical paradigm and/or generate additional questions and new knowledge.

The challenge for the researcher is to establish a balance between closed-ended and open-ended questions to ensure the elicitation and collection of reliable information leading to the greatest validity; striking the right balance is best served by preparing a well-structured interview guide and applying prompts and probes in a consistent fashion across all interviews (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p.154).

Cannold (2004) offers the following advice for researchers to employ the interview guide as a flexible tool:

While researchers nearly always carry some notes listing the topics or questions they wish to raise in roughly the order in which they would like to raise them, this typically serves only as an interview guide. The answers participants provide to follow-up questions will make up a large
and important part of the data set. Thus, an interview guide is an instrument mid-way between a closed-ended questionnaire with pre-coded responses, and a completely unstructured interview. (p. 180)

I pictured the interview guide as a homing device; informed by the literature review, goals of the research, and research questions, the well-balanced interview guide allowed me, as the researcher, to investigate the field of study while honoring participants’ responses.

Interviewing adults is a traditional and firmly established practice within the narrative research field (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1995, 1988). The expansion of the field of narrative research to include interviewing children about their experiences is currently considered acceptable, logical, and ethical. A dual belief in children’s rights and children’s competence (Brooker, 2004) indicates that children can contribute their point of view on a topic of interest to an adult in a research context (Cannold, 2004). Honoring children’s rights and respecting their competence also demands researcher awareness of the challenges and particular requirements involved in interviewing young children.

Researchers need to be thoroughly prepared for the special challenges involved in interviewing young children. Folque (2010) explains:

The challenges include designing innovative ways of researching, where children engage purposely with the researcher, feel free to express their own views and ideas, and are not put in situations where they are
preoccupied with trying to find out the purpose of a question or activity or with responding to the adult’s sometimes hidden agenda. On the other side, the rewards can include children’s ability to provide thoughtful contributions to our understanding of their views and the unique way in which they read and understand their life contexts. (p. 239)

To address the challenges and enable the rewards, interviewing young children can be situated in an activity context which respects their identity, humanity, and the dialogical process of creating meaning.

Contemporary researchers and scholars suggest conceptualizing interviewing young children as a relationship and an activity (Brooker, 2004; Folque, 2010, Freeman & Mathison, 2009). As a dialogical process to create joint meaning, engaging in context-specific, structured interview “conversations” (Cannold, 2004) asks the child-participant and adult-researcher form a “mutual constituent of data generation” (Folque, 2010). The researcher must recognize, both theoretically and in conversation, the child’s expertise; familiarity and friendship increase the likelihood of authentic recognition of the child’s expertise.

In past teaching/learning situations, I have found that utilizing a familiar social context and demonstrating respect for the child-participant helped minimize the adult-child balance of power and encouraged child confidence. As a result, children were better able to think, express their views and opinions, and navigate unfamiliar activities. I learned that it was not enough to provide many opportunities for young children to tell their stories; initially as a teacher and
later as a researcher, I understood that I must maximize contextualized, spur-of-the-moment invitations to elicit expressions of experience. These special narrative moments were more likely to happen when young children felt valued, relaxed, and confident.

Specific guidelines have been established for questioning young children during interview activities. These guidelines encourage researchers to remember that young children’s rights, feelings, and experiences can be protected and honored by adhering to ethical standards and using developmentally appropriate tools. Ethical guidelines for treating children with respect during interview activities require a researcher perspective which demonstrates that research should be conducted for and with children, as opposed to on them. Additional guidelines include:

- Be honest and open and give a truthful account of what we hope to learn
- Balance power relations
- Use developmentally appropriate activities to enhance validity and reduce stress
- Build familiarity to become a trusted adult within the child’s setting before attempting to elicit information
- Show sensitivity to social and cultural differences
- Understand that the sharing of personal information is unique
- Report any evidence of neglect, abuse, or criminal activities in the home to appropriate persons and authorities
- Plan questioning to be appropriate and acceptable in regards to children’s emotional and social maturity, family context, and cultural background
- Terminate the session if it is causing distress for the child
- Recognize that children have the right to terminate the interview at any time
- Remember the self-esteem of the child is most important (Brooker, 2004, p. 165-170)

Simple tools can be utilized to fashion a more child-friendly interview activity, such as:

- Dolls, stuffed animals, and puppets
- Persona dolls
- Photographs and drawings
- “Smiley faces” with various emotional responses
- Children’s own drawings and paintings (Brooker, 2004, p. 165-166)

All these components – interview guide, activity-interview context, child-participant and adult-researcher relationship, ethical guidelines, and developmentally appropriate tools – work together to help young children and researchers create that “mutual constituent of data generation” (Folque, 2010, p.242). The successful implementation of these interview components serves not
only as a stimulus to children’s thinking and expression, but also aids in developing reliability and validity measures within the study.

Children’s evidence becomes the researcher’s interview data in the same manner in which adults’ evidence becomes the researcher’s data. As with the assessment of all interview data, issues of reliability and validity require sustained consideration. Reliability refers to the question of whether the research findings could be repeated or replicated by another researcher or if those findings could be repeated at another point in time (Brooker, 2004; Edwards, 2004; Mac Naughton & Rolfe, 2004). Although it is difficult to replicate studies that deal with young children, who are rapidly developing and continually changing, consistency is a key effort. Points of consistency include: questioning across interviews; place and context; researcher self-reflexivity; and researcher revisits of the literature review and theoretical framework. These measures of consistency are feasible, replicable, and support reliability.

Validity regarding children’s interview evidence is established by determining whether the research instrument, in the form of the interview questions, has indeed measured what it was intended to measure (Brooker, 2004; Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Piloting, completed prior to the formal interview schedule, is the best choice for encouraging validity of interview evidence (Brooker, 2004; Hayes, 2004). Children’s interview data is worthy of triangulation with other evidence, such as parent interviews, observations, drama
and art expressions, and narrative productions; all these data sources were utilized and triangulated within my study. Brooker (2004) explains:

Against the concerns over children’s ‘acquiescence response’ (their wish to please) and their egocentrism (interpreting all issues as if they were about themselves), must be set the fact that young children are unlikely deliberately to mislead or conceal. It is probably safe to assume, in fact, that preschool children, to the best of their ability, give ‘honest’ answers to any questions appropriate the their age and understanding, and that if they do not, the ‘fault’ is with the researcher rather than with the child. (p. 168)

In my experience, young children generally offered their honest, authentic representations to questions about their experiences and wished to be seen as credible, valued participants.

**Methodology: Assessment of Narrative**

An approach to understanding and assessing narrative structure is necessary in order to organize methodology to recognize, collect, and understand young children’s narratives. McCabe and Peterson (1991) explained that similar to the manner in which narratives may be considered as a central mode by which humans interpret and organize their experiences, a narrative structure represents our understanding of a narrative. In both structure and purpose, narratives are a type of written text or oral discourse comprised of linguistic creations of variable lengths which contribute to a single, unified
production; oral narratives are a more complex, sophisticated form of discourse than general conversation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; see also Roth, 2009). My study was focused solely on children’s oral narratives which included both major genres of narrative: stories and oral exposition as defined by Roth (2009). Stories involve characters that engage in goal-directed actions to resolve problems or complications. Early-developing, oral-expository texts consist mainly of scripts and personal narratives that informally describe or recount one’s experiences. Children’s story and oral-expository narratives were assessed for macro-analysis and micro-analysis elements.

Macro-analysis approaches are mainly centered on the basic elements of a story, such as sequence of events and episodes. Specifically, macro-analysis examines text meaning and structure as a connected discourse by utilizing text grammar approaches like story grammar (Groth & Darling, 2001; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1983), high-point analysis (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletsky, 1976), and narrative structure level (Applebee, 1978). Young children develop increasingly sophisticated narratives which include complex decontextualized language and events (Nicolopoulou, 2007; Pellegrini & Galda, 2001; Roth, 2009). The degree of sophistication in children’s narratives is traditionally assessed for the following macro-analysis elements:

- Macro-organization of discourse elements
  - Sequence of events
  - Cause-event relationships and structures
At the micro-analysis level, children’s narrative text content is examined at the word, phrase, and sentence level (Roth, 2009; Roth & Spekman, 1986). Measures of productivity – like total number of words and length of utterance – and measures of grammatical organization – such as complexity, accuracy, and linguistic cohesion – are analyzed. Traditionally, micro-analysis measures (McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Peterson & McCabe, 1983) are used for assessment and evaluation and are related to screening, placement, and intervention decisions concerning young children (Snow & Van Hemel, 2008).

Both the macro-analysis and micro-analysis approaches were used to inform the investigation of children’s narrative productions in my proposed study; both analysis of text content and text structure of oral narratives were included. However to remedy the absence of psychological causation and recognize and respect stylistic diversity in the assessment of narratives of young children, I adopted the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007), which provides a culturally appropriate assessment framework.

The Story Pyramid Framework orients the assessor to consider the child’s cultural narrative traditions and styles along with traditional features of narratives like story structure and language structure. When assessing young children’s narrative skills, cultural traditions in narrating style have direct implications for the organization of a child’s narrative or story, the function of grammar, and the creation and development of character (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

It was apparent to me that the story pyramid design of the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) offered a well-constructed framework for use in assessing the narratives of young children who participate in imaginary companion play. The Story Pyramid Framework recognizes language structure, story structure, and psychological structure, and I recognized the potential of its more expansive understanding of young children’s imagination, context, and culture. Conducting research leading to beneficial application for developing children’s symbolic imagination, mature pretend play, and strong narrative skills is important; I could see how the Story Pyramid Framework emphasizes the
developmental value of sound research and practice which combines components of pretend play and narrative skill. For these reasons, I adopted the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) (see Appendix B) as the central framework for the assessment of children’s narratives within my study.

**Methodology: Multiple Case Studies**

Multiple case studies offered the context for the research methodology in my study. Conducted over time and designed to generate rich, detailed data, the case study is described as a “bounded system” for inquiry which yields multiple sources of information (Creswell, 1998). As a methodology, case study may include individuals, groups, efforts, programs, or events; case study may focus on a single case or collective cases (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). In my study, each single, individual case study was comprised of one child-participant and an accompanying parent-participant(s). Studying one child-participant at a time allowed me to conduct an in-depth examination that focused on the child-participant’s lived experience of imaginary companion play and narrative skill (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). Just as each child-participant and I, the researcher, negotiated continuous interactions, I conducted sustained, reflective interaction between the theoretical concepts under study and the data which were collected. Probing numerous sources of case study data, such as child-participant interviews, parent interviews, multiple narrative productions, and dramatic and artistic productions over an extended period of time allowed me to conduct each case study with deep inquiry. Aware of the possibility of researcher bias (Yin,
2003), I kept the research questions close in mind, often referred to the goals of
the study, and balanced flexibility with the foregrounding of the interview guide.
I found the case study with young children and their parent(s) to be an
appropriate context for analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative
methodology.

Design of the Study

The final section of Chapter 3 explains the design of the study. The
components of my descriptive, exploratory qualitative research design are
presented, including a description of specific methodology, tools, and protocols.
The selection of participants, research setting, child-participants and parent-
participants, and timeline are discussed. An explanation of data collection
includes interviews, narrative productions tasks, artistic and dramatic production
tasks, and observations. Chapter 3 closes with a detailed rationale dealing with
data analysis/interpretation and data presentation.

Selection of Participants

Informational flyers describing the research study were distributed to the
director pre-approved populations of eight early childhood care and education
centers and fifteen businesses within a ten mile radius of the researcher’s home
in central PA (See Appendix C). A total of 335 flyers were distributed. Word-of-
mouth responses yielded five interested parent-participant contacts. I followed
with personal telephone calls which included an explanation of the study, criteria
for inclusion, and time frame of commitment (See Appendix D). Study criteria
included child-participant in the 4 – 6-year-old age range, who were identified as currently having, or have had in the past year, an imaginary companion; case studies required a parent for each participating child. Child-participant #1 was drawn from this initial sweep; child-participant #2 was added at a later date.

Face-to-face informational meetings were held with each set of potential parent-participants. Potential child-participants were not present at these informational meetings. Study information was carefully reviewed, and within the parent-participant Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research (Appendix D), the following information was explained: purpose of the study; procedures to be followed; discomfort and risks; benefits; duration; statement of confidentiality; right to request information and ask questions; and voluntary participation.

Specific measures of confidentiality were discussed at length during informational meetings and deserve appropriate coverage here, as they are important assurances of feasibility in the design of the study (Edwards, 2004). Included was a statement that all participation in this research project would be completely confidential, and all information would be kept private. The child-participant’s name, and the parent-participant’s name, would not appear on any documents. Auditory recordings and original drawings would be stored in a locked safe in the researcher’s office; only the researcher had access to the safe, drawings, and recordings. Original drawings and recordings would be destroyed by the year 2018. Transcriptions, archived drawings, and summaries would be
kept in a locked, password protected computer file; only the researcher and the researcher’s advisor would have access to transcriptions, archived drawings, and summaries. Possible future publication or presentation drawn from this research would not contain any personal or identifiable information. Only The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services could review records related to this research study.

Parent-participant(s) were offered the option of alternate representation at child-participant sessions designed primarily for parents-in-absentia, known as the Alternate Adult and Alternate Location Approval form. Parent-participant(s) #1 and #2 declined this option as appreciated but not necessary.

Parent-participant(s) #1 signed consent forms at the close of our initial informational meeting. Parent-participant(s) #2 signed consent forms at the next informational meeting attended by the potential child-participant, potential parent-participant(s), and researcher. Copies of signed consent forms were e-mailed or delivered to parent-participants.

As a researcher, I gave special care to provide a developmentally appropriate discussion with each potential child-participant. The Assent Form and Script for Potential Child-Participant (Appendix D) contains a detailed script which I adhered to as closely as possible while practicing a sharp awareness of the
behaviors and questions of each potential child-participant. Parent-participant(s) were present during the initial meeting with potential child-participants.

I thanked the potential child-participant for meeting with me. After introducing myself and my association with The Pennsylvania State University, I explained that I was writing a book about kids’ play and kids’ stories and needed some help from kids. I explained that the kids’ help was called research. Specifically, I said, “Some friends are real, like the friends you go to school with, and some friends are pretend, like the pretend friends you make up. My book is about pretend friends. Your (mom, dad, other) said you have a pretend friend. Is that right?” I said that I needed to find out answers to questions about pretend friends, and I needed some kids’ stories too. Some of the stories would be about real things, like making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Some of the stories would be about pretend things, like a pony with wings. I told each potential child-participant that I was interested in hearing their stories and was wondering if we could talk together about pretend friends and tell stories for my book.

I told potential child-participant(s) that we would get together a couple times a week for a little while to talk about pretend friends and tell stories and that their (mom, dad, other) would be there too. I would ask some questions about pretend stuff, like being invisible, and the potential child-participant could draw some pictures too. We could to tell a story into a microphone to be recorded so I could write it down later. We would do this about 8 or 10 different times, altogether.
I explained that the potential child-participant didn’t have to answer any questions they didn’t like and could stop doing the research with me if they didn’t want to do it anymore. Also, I made clear that all answers, drawings, and stories would be private and kids would get a secret code name in my book. When I asked what the potential child-participant(s) thought about this idea, lots of giggling and affirmative head nodding followed. Child-participant #1 wondered if she would be famous, and child-participant #2 asked me to please bring sprinkle doughnuts. Potential parent-participant(s) had previously discussed the study and participation with the potential child-participants, and although shyness was demonstrated, so was excitement. Child-participants gave assent and then played with toys and art materials which I provided, while parent-participants signed the Assent Form and Script for Potential Child-Participant (Appendix D). We concluded the initial meeting of parent-participant(s), child-participant(s), and researcher with a family tea party. Copies of all signed consent forms were delivered to parent-participant(s).

Of special note here is the inclusion and age of child-participant #2. The child-participants are first cousins. During the course of data collection with child-participant #1, the parents of (later) child-participant #2 expressed interest in the study and shared that their daughter had a definite, current imaginary companion. We met and thoroughly discussed the study, methods, and possibility of including the 3 yr 9 mo old (at the time of initial contact; 3 yr 10 mo at time of study initiation) daughter as a child-participant in the study. Both
parents and their daughter were very enthusiastic about their daughter’s participation with full awareness of the 4-6 yr age range of the study. With full parental consent, I began work with child-participant #2 when she was age 3 yr 10 mo of age; child-participant #2 marked her fourth birthday in the midst of the study timeframe.

**Research Setting**

Both child-participants live in north central Pennsylvania near the New York state border. When research settings were discussed and chosen by the parent-participants, child-participant #1 and accompanying parent-participant #1 suggested meeting during the quiet post-lunch hours in a local restaurant where the family is employed part-time. Parent-participant #2 requested that we meet in the family home. Both contexts proved to be excellent choices as they were familiar to each child-participant, convenient for the parent-participants, and therefore increased my access to data. Both contexts were also a reasonable commute, so a physical boundary setting was met according to my projected time and distance investment. By increasing my access to data through the context location and adhering to simple boundary setting, I recognized and specifically planned for issues of feasibility (Edwards, 2004); these measures ultimately helped to ensure timeline continuity and the completion of the study.

**Child-Participant(s) and Parent-Participant(s)**

Child-participant #1, Tory, is a preschool female aged 5 yrs 10 mo at the time of the study initiation. Tory is the only child in a two-parent household, and
she is part of a large extended family. She enjoys social interactions and playtime with her cousins and school friends, and community and church friends.

At the time of the study, Tory attended a local morning Head Start program three days per week, was just beginning to read, and had mastered roller skating backwards.

Parent-participants #1 are comprised of Tory’s father and mother. The father is presently completing a B.S. degree program, internship, and works part-time in a local restaurant. Holding three B.S. degrees, Tory’s mother plans to attend graduate school in the near future. She carries two part-time jobs, including employment in the same restaurant as the father. Both parents participated in the study, although the mother acted as the main parent-participant.

Child-participant #2, Kyleigh, is a preschool female aged 3 yrs 10 mo at the time of the study initiation. Kyleigh celebrated her fourth birthday during the course of the study. Kyleigh lives in a two parent household with her natural parents and is the fourth child in a family of five children. She has three older siblings (a sister and two brothers who range in age from 10 – 14 yrs) and a newborn brother. Her older siblings are from her mother’s previous marriage; the mother and ex-husband share custody of these children. All five children live together in the central household during the week; most weekends the older three children go to stay with their biological father. During these weekends, Kyleigh and her baby brother remain in the central household with their natural
mother and father. During the period of data collection, Kyleigh began Head Start, was learning to swim, and sometimes spoke in a language she called “Spinish.”

Kyleigh’s mother has earned two AAS degrees, a B.S. degree, and is currently finishing her M.S. degree. A full-time teacher, the mother also works full-time in the same establishment as parent-participants #1. Kyleigh’s father is working toward an AS degree. He too is currently employed full-time in the same establishment as Kyleigh’s mother and both parent-participants #1. Kyleigh’s mother and father shared parent-participant #2 responsibilities.

In order to assure confidentiality, an issue of feasibility (Edwards, 2004), child-participants#1 and #2 were assigned code names. Additional persons referred to in conversation, interviews, and narrative productions are not identifiable. Participating parents are not identified in text and were referred to as parent-participants #1 or #2 and described only as mother or father.

**Timeline**

Data collection sessions with child-participant #1 occurred from April 2, 2013 through June 4, 2013. There were twelve child-participant sessions; sessions varied in length from 60-120 minutes. There were three parent-participant data collection sessions of 90-120 minutes each. Data collection sessions with child-participant #2 occurred from July 17, 2031 through October 14, 2013. There were ten child-participant data collection sessions which varied
in length from 60-90 minutes. There were two parent-participant data collection sessions of 90-120 minutes each.

The data collection dates were plotted within the comprehensive course of the study. Data collection sessions with child-participant #1 were completed three weeks before the initiation of data collection sessions with child-participant #2. This break allowed time for uninterrupted review, checking, and verification of data. I set a reasonable and achievable timeline for the study, including data collection, and this allowed me as a researcher to fulfill another measure of feasibility (Edwards, 2004).

**Data Collection: Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews, including both closed-ended and open-ended questions, for participating children and parents were based on the model established by Taylor, Cartwright, and Carlson (1993) and the double-interview process (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Child-participant interviews were focused on identification of an imaginary companion, the characteristics of the imaginary companion, play with the imaginary companion, elements of imaginative play, and the play-story connection.

Child-participant interviews began with an activity or game; the interviews were then conducted as social interactions within an activity context. Activities included drawing and coloring and small motor games like throwing pebbles in the puddle and assembling puzzles. Doll play, stuffed animal play, and sharing food were also activities. Each child-participant’s interview was individualized
according to age, development, and interest. Responses often generated new questions which provided additional information and increased my understanding and helped me to orient more to the play and narrative priorities of the child-participant (Glesne, 2006).

All meetings opened with a few sentences about the purpose of the study, questions about the child-participant’s day, and a reminder that the child-participant could skip a question or end the meeting at any time. I carefully kept in mind and in plan the interview guide, activity-interview context, child-participant and adult-researcher relationship, ethical guidelines, and developmentally appropriate tools. Interview questions were spread across several sessions and enfolded into an activity. Many interview topics and prompts generated discussions in subsequent sessions. I followed these child-participant leads while keeping in mind the interview guide, research questions, and goals of the study. My priority was to work together, the child-participant and researcher, to create that “mutual constituent of data generation” (Folque, 2010, p. 242).

Parent-participant interviews focused on parent awareness and identification of the child’s imaginary companion, their child’s past and current history of imaginary companion play and imaginative play, parent observations of their child’s imaginary companion play, and overheard or shared conversations, discourse, and dialogue concerning the imaginary companion or play with the imaginary companion (Appendix E).
All interviews were recorded, reviewed, and transcribed to text. Double-checked interviews were conducted; child-participants and parent-participants reviewed responses and, in some instances, further clarified points of detail or offered additional information. In this manner, validation and accuracy of interview data was increased.

**Data Collection: Narrative Production Tasks**

Following the model created by Roth (2009), the child-participants completed five narrative production tasks (Narrative Production Tasks #1-#5): story retelling, script narrative, personal event narrative (PENS), story narrative, and picturebook extension narrative. The rationale for the chosen order in narrative task production, beginning with story retelling, progressing to script and personal event and finally to story production, is based on the increasingly sophisticated narrative skills required to produce story narrative as opposed to story retelling and script narrative. Narrative Production Tasks #1-5 (See Appendix F) were conducted using the procedure outline by Curenton and Lucas (2007). For the same reason, narrative task production sessions were distinct to the type of narrative task, and narrative task types did not overlap.

During Narrative Production Task #1, several picturebooks that were high quality children’s literature selections and developmentally appropriate to the child-participant were chosen. The child-participant was asked to choose a book from the selections, and that book was read to the child-participant. The child-participant was asked to retell the story (See Appendix F).
Narrative Production Task #2 asked the child-participant to create three separate oral narrative scripts. A narrative script is an event sequence which recounts a very familiar, routine experience, like going to the dentist or shopping for groceries. Oral script prompts were provided by the researcher (See Appendix F).

Narrative Production Task #3 required the child-participant to produce three personal event narratives (PENS). Parent-participants were asked to suggest two recent past events, and the child-participant was asked to suggest one recent past event which recounted an event experienced by the child or someone familiar to the child; the events could be unique, but familiar, and preferably confined to the space on one day (See Appendix F). The child-participant would then narrate the personal event narrative to the researcher.

Narrative Production Task #4 was created as a story narrative to demonstrate child-participant knowledge and manipulation of the basic structure of stories, known as story schema. The story narrative task asked the child-participant to create a story about a pretend experience that was not part of their immediate context. Child-participants were asked to create a total of one to three story narratives based on prompts, or story beginnings. The researcher chose one prompt, such as “Tell me a story about a monster,” and the child-participant would generate two prompts. If the child-participant was unable to generate prompts, the researcher provided appropriate prompts, or story beginnings (See Appendix F).
Finally, Narrative Production Task #5 asked the child-participant to continue the story of a picturebook; I labeled this task “picturebook extension” (See Appendix F). I believe that plot extension and projection are highly related to story schema development and indicate sophisticated decontextualized language and fictional construction. This may represent a demonstration of the connection between pretend play and literacy, located theoretically in the specific cognitive functions connecting imaginary companion play and narrative skill development. I envisioned Narrative Production Task #5 “picturebook extension” as a reasonable invitation for children to demonstrate their development of symbolic imagination which provides, “... a field for its exercise, (where) pretend play and fictional narratives help prepare the way for the development of abstract thinking and higher mental processes” (Nicolopoulou, 2002, p. 122).

This play-literacy activity offered a mode of combining storytelling with story-acting within the research setting. I believe this model effectively integrated the main elements of narrative discourse and play following a call for recognizing the “close affinity and interdependence” between these two main elements in children’s experience and development (Nicolopoulou, 2007, p. 138), (see also, Paley, 1981, 1990, 1997, & 2004). The picturebook-based Narrative Production Task #5 is my original design, and as an application of established classroom research utilizing picturebooks to consider reality and envision change (Ghiso & McGuire, 2007; O’Neil, 2010; Swartz, 2010); it should be considered exploratory in nature.
During Narrative Production Task #5, several developmentally appropriate, high quality children’s literature picturebooks were selected. I chose a picturebook from the selection, and it was read to the child-participant. The child-participant was asked to create a fictional extension of the picturebook story. Production Task #5 (See Appendix F) was conducted using the procedure outline by Curenton and Lucas (2007) and assessed using the same Story Pyramid Framework approach utilized for the scripts, personal event narratives, and story narratives which comprised the Narrative Production Tasks #1-4.

**Data Collection: Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks**

Child-participant interviews and/or sessions included an artistic production activity in which the child was invited to draw a picture of the imaginary companion. Additional opportunities for artistic production activities presented during narrative production tasks and general conversation; examples included drawings of play with friends, toys, or imaginary play contexts. The child-participant was offered an opportunity to take part in dramatic production tasks such as “acting out” their fictional picturebook story by calling their imaginary companion on a toy telephone prop and relating their picturebook narrative (See Appendix F).

**Data Collection: Observations**

Researchers recognize direct observation as an important addition to the interview process (Patton, 2002). By being fully present and aware of the goals of the study, the researcher enters the experience of the participant in a
systematic manner and carefully records events, details, and anecdotal notes. During the course of the study, I kept a journal in which I recorded pre-meeting thoughts, meeting notes, observations, and post-meeting reflections. These observations and journal entries provided a check for accuracy, confirmed situational contexts, and generated points of entry for upcoming sessions. Also, observation notes and journal entries provided a check for researcher bias as I continually revisited and analyzed the notes as they related to the pre-meeting thoughts and post-meeting reflections. I found that the descriptive notes that I recorded provided touch points for thinking about the critical theories involved in the study and helped me to retain awareness of the child-participant’s perspective. Especially as a check for my interpretations, observation notes and journal entries proved to be a catalyst for different interpretation when revisiting interview data.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

I approached data analysis as an ongoing, sustained process directly linked to the collection of data. When data collection and data analysis are understood as an inter-related activity, the focus and direction of the study is continually fashioned by the researcher (Glesne, 2006) and is recognized as sustained reflexivity (Edwards, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Therefore, the data analysis is never separated from the data collection. Practicing sustained reflexivity allowed me, as the researcher, to conduct analysis of narratives while
simultaneously conducting assessment of narratives, and I was therefore able to make sense of multiple sources of data.

Through analysis of narrative regarding interview transcripts, interactions, and Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks (Polkinghorne, 1995), I examined data with a “who-what-when-where-why-how” intent to form a deep understanding of child-participants’ experiences with imaginary companion play. From participants’ stories, the appearance and frequency of topics and themes emerged which may inform existing knowledge and theory and/or generate alternative theory production.

Assessment of narrative productions, generated by Narrative Production Tasks #1-5, followed the structure and guidelines (Appendix G) of the Story Pyramid Framework (Curenton & Lucas, 2007). Child-participants’ live narrative productions were collected by digital recorder, transcribed into text, classified as documents within this study, and assessed by the researcher.

All of the following have been included in the analysis of data in this study: child-participant Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play Interview transcripts; parent-participant Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play Interview transcripts; Narrative Production Tasks #1-5 assessment documents; Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks images and transcripts; my observation notes; and my reflective journal notes. Procedures for analysis of data were directly linked with the interpretation of data in an effort to demonstrate researcher reflexivity. As a researcher, I aimed for a high
degree of reflexivity, and I was able to conduct data analysis as a sustained focus and ongoing activity throughout every stage of the research process, including analysis and interpretation, while maintaining an acute self-awareness of my impact on the study itself (Edwards, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

**Data Presentation**

Coupled with analysis and interpretation of data, the presentation of data in this study took the form of a descriptive, interpretive narrative. Written with a creative narrative stance, it was my intention to preserve the richness and beauty of the child-participants’ experiences and stories of imaginary companion play and connect them with the assessment of narratives (according to the Story Pyramid Framework, Currenton & Lucas, 2007). Just as observation, interaction, and shared discourse are preferred modes of inquiry for operating with participants within the natural, daily context of experience, I believe these modes can literally take not only the researcher, but also the reader from the front row theater seat onto the stage with the actors when the author writes a descriptive, interpretive narrative. The reader is then not restricted by a limited view, but rather acts and interacts with study participants in a personal manner. By preserving the authenticity of the child-participants’ perception of their experiences with imaginary companion play and originality of child-participants’ narratives, I offer the reader the opportunity to explore play-literacy connections through a multiple-skills lens while considering and theorizing how play and
literacy skills develop simultaneously and interact to form longer developmental trajectories of language and literacy learning.
Chapter Four

Case Study One: Tory

Preamble to the Case Studies

Life is a learning experience. Often surprising, sometimes shocking, and occasionally ironic, our experiences intertwine and overlap like an intricate, highly dimensional web. Whether by choice or by default, I have engaged with life within the context of life-long learning. I believe life as a learning experience and research as a science are not separate threads in my web but are mutually informative and energizing. Perhaps because of this perspective, I am highly skilled in imagining beyond my goals. However, much like life itself, from the very beginning this study surprised me and greatly exceeded my expectations.

Despite the distribution of hundreds of recruitment flyers, the child-participants and parent-participants in this study were referred by word of mouth. My oldest brother and I were sitting on the back porch, drinking tea, and discussing my research study. In the midst of my explanation, he interrupted me and told me that his granddaughter, my great-niece, had a vivid imaginary companion. He suggested that I contact my niece and ask about her daughter and the imaginary companion. After telephone calls and e-mails with informational and recruitment material, I met with my niece and her husband, and we discussed their daughter and her imaginary companion play. The parents
were intrigued by the theoretical foundations of the study and the potential value of the research for the field of early learning. They went home to discuss the idea with their young daughter, and she reacted with definite interest and curiosity that someone was interested in her play experiences and stories. The parents called to request that they and their daughter, through a joint decision, be included as participants in my study. Child-participant #1 Tory, and parent-participants #1 were therefore recruited.

Following the second data collection session with child-participant #1 Tory, her mother explained that another great-niece of mine, Kyleigh, also had an imaginary companion. Informational and recruitment meetings followed this word of mouth referral, and Kyleigh and her parents signed on as child-participant #2 and parent-participants #2. Regardless of all the professional contacts and hundreds of recruitment flyers, both participants were word of mouth referrals drawn from my large extended family. I was not aware that Tory and Kyleigh had imaginary companions; their parents did not know I was investigating cases of imaginary companion play. Thank goodness my brother stopped by for tea. How ironic!

Of special note here is the familial relationship of the participants. Tory’s mother and Kyleigh’s mother are sisters; they are my nieces. While I knew them well as children, I had seldom seen these nieces as adults and had only met their young daughters once or twice as babies. The child-participants and I were strangers, known only to each other through stories shared by their mothers.
Stories have been important in my life. Indeed, narrative skill is a major component for investigation in this study, and through the unexpected word of mouth referrals and resulting selection of participants, stories told by others would form the beginning of our researcher-participant relationships. I could envision a strand unfurling within my web, forming another connection between life-long learning and scientific research. What a surprise; how far beyond my expectations!

**Introduction to Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 presents the case study of Tory and her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly. Tory’s mother and father also participated in this case study. The purpose of this chapter is to offer the exploratory case study as it unfolded; to best tell the story of Tory and Emily the Butterfly, I adopted a creative narrative writing stance. Interviews, observations, narrative task productions, and artistic and dramatic productions are included. Data drawn from interviews and observations tells a rich, compelling story about Tory, her life, and Emily the Butterfly. Direct quotations from Tory and her mother are delivered in italics throughout the chapter. Tory’s narrative task productions are included as full transcripts. A collection of Tory’s artistic and dramatic productions completes Chapter 4 presentation of the case study of Tory and Emily the Butterfly. Deep analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative is conducted later in Chapter 6, but the aim here is to allow the reader to construct a personal understanding of Tory through her own words.
Meeting Tory

As a researcher with eighteen years experience teaching young children, I recognize the importance of preparation for meeting and encouraging a child-participant and researcher relationship. Prior to meeting with Tory, child-participant #1, I asked her mother to suggest several activities that Tory enjoyed: artwork, writing, and collecting small objects were suggested. I collected bright crayons, small notebooks of blank paper, and a bag of smooth river pebbles and thought we could draw pictures together or toss pebbles in a rain puddle while we got acquainted. Although I had these possible activities in mind as a context for our initial discussion, I was also aware of the need for flexibility and balance. I would pay close attention to Tory, follow her lead, and respect her preferences. These thoughts were swirling around my mind during the one hour drive to Tory’s village and our first meeting in a local inn where Tory’s mother and father were employed. Although I drew on my former experiences with young children and posed possible greeting scenarios, I could not have predicted our first meeting.

Tory was waiting for me on the veranda of the inn. Jumping and waving to me, she was dressed in her favorite clothing of striped leggings, sparkling roller derby sweatshirt, and glittering tutu. I introduced myself and held out my hand for her to shake. She stepped back a little as I approached and then, visibly squaring her shoulders, she opted out of the handshake and instead presented a colorful crayon drawing to me. Tory had created a picture of us bent over a
table, reading a book, crayons scattered in busy array. She had drawn herself wearing the same outfit she had chosen for today; her bright blonde curls were topped with a bow. She pointed to the hair of my image and spoke her first words to me: *I put lots of highlights in your hair. Mom said it used to be brown.* Above us in the picture Tory had drawn a rainbow and a bright sun shining down on our heads. Smiling and tugging on my sleeve she said, *Come on, we made a tea party like my mom used to have at your house in the old days.*

Tory’s mother greeted me with hugs; Tory watched intently. They had arranged a tea party table in a small private dining room annexing the main concourse area of the inn. Nearby conversations and the clatter of dishes created familiar background sound. Tory’s aunt, who is Tory’s mother’s older sister and therefore another niece to me, came out from the kitchen to warmly greet me and deliver tea. Tory moved her tea cup to my side of the table and sat next to me. During the course of the tea party, we chatted about favorite books and memories of her mother’s childhood playtimes at my house.

Tory was intrigued by our stories of her mother as a child. She especially enjoyed hearing about the summer her mother and my four children, ages 4-10, turned the old chicken coup into a cabin and built a fort in the woods that they named “Kids Territory.” Tory played with toy ponies and looked at books while I explained the legal and methodological components of my study to her mother and answered questions. Tory sang for me and demonstrated a dance she had learned in Pre-K. Then, much to her mother’s amazement, she ran into the
hallway and returned with her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly. When her mother expressed surprise that Emily the Butterfly was there, Tory explained, *She came because it’s about her, and she knows that.*

Emily the Butterfly stayed while Tory and I talked about Easter egg hunts. Then I explained my study to Tory and her role as a possible participant. When I mentioned that she could skip any question or activity or stop the study at any time, Tory assured me that she would never do that. She explained that’s not what they do in her Pre-K; they finish all their projects. Tory posed several questions: could I buy sparkle crayons, and would she be famous because some authors are famous? We discussed these ideas to her satisfaction, and Tory readily agreed to participate in my study. She left my side of the table and snuggled quietly against her mother. It had been a long day of preschool, tea party, and social welcome. Tory told us that Emily the Butterfly had gone home. It was time for Tory to do the same.

Tory’s mother and I made plans to meet the next week for the Parent-Participant Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play Interview. Tory hugged me goodbye and asked me to please bring chocolate chip cookies to the next meeting. I drove home with her crayon drawing on the passenger seat beside me.

The tea party planned by Tory’s mother, her stories of childhood play with my children, and the warm conversation between us served as a secure welcome. Tory’s own decision to share her thoughts and experiences, like the
drawing of us together, her singing and dancing, and moving beside me at the table were a credible invitation into her world. I was honored and more than a little humbled. With my years of experience and bag of reliable researcher tricks, I had expected to work a bit of my own invitational magic. Instead, this young 5-year-old child opened her heart and mind and offered her trust to me. When she left the room and returned with her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly, I was amazed by her understanding. I knew Tory would be much more than an optimal case study; she would be a friend. Within this friendship, we would navigate the process of making meaning of imaginary companion play and storytelling. I could not have imagined a better beginning.

**Background of Tory and her Parents**

Tory was aged 5 years 10 months at the study initiation. She is an only child in a two parent household and part of a large extended family. With 49 cousins on her mother’s side and 6 cousins on her father’s side, she enjoys family playtimes, trips, and sleepovers. She plays with friends from school, buddies from her mother’s roller derby team, and church acquaintances. Attending Head Start three mornings per week, Tory was beginning to read and write but explained that she had not yet mastered telling time. She attended many roller derby practices with her mother and had recently mastered skating backwards, which her mother described as mostly wiggling.

Tory’s mother and father both participated in the study. At the time of the study, Tory’s father was completing a B.S. degree, working at an internship, and
carrying a part-time job. Tory’s mother holds three B.S. degrees and plans to attend graduate school in the near future. She carries two part-time jobs including employment in same restaurant as her husband.

The family participates in shared story reading and storytelling. The mother explained that she and the father began reading to Tory even before she was born. Reading books together is a favorite shared activity, but Tory is just as likely to look at books independently. Her mother also reported that Tory regularly reads books to Emily the Butterfly, but Tory assured me that Emily the Butterfly mostly reads stories by herself.

Oral storytelling is an important component of family life in Tory’s home. The mother remembers many stories about growing up with multiple siblings and cousins, and Tory is interested in hearing her mother’s stories. At the time of this study, Tory had recently listened to stories about her mother’s imaginary companion, George the Duck, and tales of play with my own children in the woods and old buildings on our farm. Tory believes that she and her mother share common traits in playing and pretending like imaginary companion play. Tory’s mother described it as:

*It is special, because we have stories to trade. We’ve been writing a story book about funny things that she (Tory) has said... She’s very imaginative. She’ll probably come up with lots of stories. She’s very good at ad-libbing and coming up with a lot of things on the spot.*

Tory recalled their story documentation differently when I asked:
Do you make stories at home (too)?

*We don’t write them down, but my mom wrote stuff in my book when I was little. I guess we mostly tell the stories.*

Regardless of the context, home or school, Tory prefers stories and movies that are based in pretense or, as Tory described, *made up.* She had recently watched movies with characters such as miniature elephant and a princess. Tory can easily name the titles of many books and movies, but she was not able to choose a favorite saying, *I like too many.*

**Sessions with Tory**

Our first meeting set the physical and social contexts for subsequent sessions. Tory and I met in the small, quiet dining area of the inn where her parents were employed. Because she was familiar with the inn, Tory was very comfortable working with me in that environment. From April 2, 2013 through June 4, 2013, we met for twelve sessions. A parent-participant, usually her mother, was in attendance for every session. Sessions varied in length from 60-120 minutes. There were three parent-participant data collection sessions of 90-120 minutes each.

Tory was very aware that we were conducting research. Having a clear concept of the scientific method from her Pre-K classroom experience, she took our research seriously. In fact, when I explained that I would use a secret code name for her in my book, she said, *Don’t use a secret code name for me. How will people know if it’s the truth?* Tory assumed personal responsibility for
partnering with me in my research. She understood that she was sharing her imaginary companion play and real, pretend stories with me so that I could write a good book.

I planned our research tasks for each session to be posited within an activity and our social interaction, so Tory and I ate soup, enjoyed tea parties, and cut apple slices into shapes. We drew and colored pictures and played games. She taught me songs from school; I taught her how to talk like Donald Duck. We tossed pebbles in the puddles below the veranda. When we played with dolls I brought from my home, Tory expressed no surprise that I owned a dollhouse. We read storybooks. I always had activities and materials prepared, and Tory usually had ideas too. We were able to meld our ideas to function as a context for completing the goals of the session. For example, on the day of Narrative Production Task #4, Storytelling with and without Researcher Prompt, Tory wanted to play a game instead. I quickly revamped the prompt selection by tearing a paper placemat into sections and writing a prompt component on each. Options included: pony, cat, wings, roller skates, sparkles, invisible, etc... I put the strips into category piles, and Tory chose one slip from each pile. Then she constructed a story around her choices. She insisted that I take a turn too; she thought my story was hilarious. Our laughter caused her aunt, cousin, and workers in the kitchen to come investigate, and Tory invited her cousin Kyleigh play the game too.
Our sessions quickly assumed the shape and flow of a story schema itself. To begin each session, much like declaring the setting, we briefly reviewed the goals of the study and Tory’s rights as a child-participant. Next, we spent a few minutes talking about our day so far; this helped orient us to our tasks for the session. These little discussions also helped us touch base, connect with each other, and assume our character-like identities for the session. The task of the day would become the plot; our contributions and laughter thickened the story. The climax of our session would usually be a humorous verbal twist, a thoughtful observance, or occasionally the revelation of a deep inner emotion. Finally, we would decompress with a lighter activity. I will always remember the conversation in which Tory proudly told me her parents were very smart. Then her frowned and shook her head, whispering, *they can’t be smart all the time, but we can never tell them that. It would just hurt their feelings very, very bad.* I felt that Tory’s revelation was a personal reflection, so I respected her privacy. Rather than prod further, I nodded my agreement, and we concluded that particular session by rolling pennies down the long hallway in the foyer.

Knowing how committed Tory was to our research, I watched for signs that she was pushing herself too hard. Fidgeting could be a sign of restlessness or a need for the restroom, so I would call a break, and Tory would have the freedom to work things out for herself. Sometimes though, I would simply ask her, “How are you doing right now?” She was honest with me, and I was flexible. For example, one day she and her mother arrived a bit late, and she flopped
quietly down on a chair. This was unlike Tory’s usual animated entry. I greeted her mother, brought Tory some juice from the kitchen, and asked about her morning. With teary eyes, Tory told me that she was very tired; they had worked on assessments in Pre-K. She put her hands over her eyes and asked could we just chill today and only color? I assured her that chilling was just fine. During the course of our relaxed coloring, we had one of our most profound conversations about reality and pretense (which I will address in a later section).

**Interviews and Conversations with Tory**

Tory readily identified her imaginary companion and stated her name is Emily the Butterfly. “Emily” is her first name, and “the Butterfly” is her other name. Tory explained her own age at the arrival of Emily the Butterfly in the following conversation:

Do you remember the first time that Emily the Butterfly came to play?

*Ah, I think she came when I was four.*

Were you little or big then?

*Yeah, I was pretty little and then I got big. And then Emily the Butterfly came. I was five and big. I’m five and big now.*

Tory’s mother reported that from the age of 2 years, her daughter consistently engaged in ongoing conversations with other imaginary companions. For the past year, Emily the Butterfly has been Tory’s sole imaginary companion. The mother and father have witnessed multiple conversations Tory had with Emily the Butterfly and reported that Tory has often told them she is going to
her bedroom to play with Emily. The mother also shared that the Head Start teachers are aware of Tory’s imaginary companion play and support imaginative play. Family relatives, like maternal and paternal grandparents and close cousins, are aware of stories told by Tory’s parents about her imaginary companion play with Emily the Butterfly.

The same age, height, and sex as Tory, Emily the Butterfly is *pink with sparkling purple dots and giant-sized for a butterfly*. Tory whispered to me that Emily the Butterfly is *very shiny sometimes; it’s beautiful*. Her wings are filled with *bright purple and pink sparkly stripes*. She *flies smoothly through the sky, rapidly or slowly, by flapping her wings* (that make) *swooshing sounds*. Tory explained that she herself *rides high in the sky on Emily the Butterfly; she is not scared, and Emily isn’t scared either*. The mother’s reports of Tory’s descriptions of Emily the Butterfly confirm these specific details.

Emily the Butterfly lives in Tory’s house and sleeps in Tory’s bed or on the parents’ bedroom floor; Tory’s mother provided this same information. Emily also shares typical family routines like doing errands, chores, and eating with the family. Emily the Butterfly’s dietary preferences mirror Tory’s; they eat *everything but spicy food and like ice cream sundaes topped with whipped cream, cherries, and sprinkles*. Tory explained that her imaginary companion actually prefers a steady diet of nectar, but *sometimes we don’t have a lot of flowers and she tries to go somewhere, but it’s ok with me – she goes away to*
get some nectar. Tory describes nectar as sweet, similar to ice cream in soda, and able to give extra physical powers.

When I asked Tory who would more likely win a bike race, she or Emily the Butterfly, Tory assured me that:

Ah, Emily, because she can bike also really fast.

I wonder what makes her be able to bike so fast?

She uses her nectar, and she puts water on it, so it makes it more slippery.

Slippery! Is that how she would win?

But I let her win. I do.

What does she think when your let her win?

Ah, ah, I don’t know what she thinks.

Can you let me know sometime, when she wins, what she’s thinking?

Yeah, I probably could.

Even though she is an expert flyer, Emily also travels in Tory’s car. She goes to Tory’s grandma’s house where they eat ice cream and take naps. Emily has her own special recliner chair at grandma’s house. Tory explained that although Emily the Butterfly could fly to grandma’s house, which would be much quicker, she prefers to ride in the car with Tory. Emily also rides the school bus; Tory reported that Emily goes to my school with me but not all the time.

Although she is shy and not a much talker, Emily is an enthusiastic singer with a unique and pretty voice. Tory shared that she herself has limited
knowledge of this style of singing, and was certain that I wouldn’t be able to identify Emily’s singing. Emily the Butterfly is also an expert roller skater with flower covered skates described by Tory as real and not exactly real. Flying, singing, and roller skating are all talents, very good talents according to Tory, and those talents are what Tory likes best about Emily the Butterfly. Tory also demonstrated her skill in skating backward and called it a talent explaining that the other kids at derby can’t all skate backward, but I can.

Tory carefully described play with Emily. Playing with dolls and reading books to the dolls in Tory’s bedroom are their special play activities. Tory was clear when she explained I usually play with my dolls, the pretend stuff. They have friends too, you know. And Emily’s there too... the other dolls are their friends, and they play together with me... but Emily mostly is my friend, but she knows my dolls too. In fact, Emily has a favorite doll that Tory remembered as a doll that I really liked awful much, the best actually, but I gave it to her for her to sleep with, and it rings. When you shake it – it sounds like a rattle of some kind. I gave her that doll to sleep with. Sometimes Emily the Butterfly wraps herself in Tory’s robe to keep warm and sleeps with the dolls in Tory’s little story tent while Tory continues to play.

Although she lives with Tory’s family, Emily has a butterfly family of her own. She has sleepovers and picnics with her natural family and then returns to Tory’s house. One day when Tory and Emily the Butterfly were riding the school bus together, Emily introduced her new baby sister to Tory, named Sparkle,
because her wings sparkle a lot; she is a tiny new baby who doesn’t talk yet.

Tory reported that Emily’s mother takes care of baby Sparkle, but Emily helps in the same manner that Tory helps with her own baby cousin, Jem. Compared to 3-month-old Jem, Emily is much more little than Jem. She’s not even big enough to smile yet. Tory told me that when she held Sparkle, she had to be gentle and careful just like the time she held newborn baby Jem on a pillow so she wouldn’t drop him. Baby Sparkle lives at home with her butterfly family, but Sparkle also enjoys short visits with Tory and Emily the Butterfly on the school bus and at Tory’s house.

Tory easily named her people friends at school and roller derby; she also distinguished Emily the Butterfly as her pretend friend. The following exchange took place during our first session of the Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview:

Your mom told me that you have some friends at school. Tell me about your friends at school.

Ok. I have Lena, Timmy, and some more, like John. One is not nice; she’s a frenemy; she has problems. Her mom is in jail again.

Tell me about your friends at roller derby.

It’s mostly Sammy and Addie. And we skate and play outside when the big kids go too. That’s the good part.

Playing together – that sounds like some real friends.

Some have nicknames, like Maddie or something.
Those are for real friends, do I have that right? Are they real-people friends?

Yeah, they’re real. I know them at my school and at derby.

Uh-huh. You know, sometimes our friends are real people friends. And sometimes our friends are pretend friends, like the kind that we make up and pretend that they are real. Your mom said that you have a pretend friend. I remember that you told the name of your pretend friend to me the other day, didn’t you?

Yep, Emily the Butterfly. Her name is Emily the Butterfly.

In a conversation regarding her real friends at school, Tory talked about a few students who misbehaved. She cited a recent day when her friends did not observe the directions of the substitute teacher; they did not stop playing when the teacher called for playtime to be concluded. Other examples of misbehavior included being off-task, daydreaming, and exhibiting lack of self-control. When questioned, Tory emphatically denied the possibility that Emily the Butterfly would ever do anything naughty or get into trouble but that:

She (Emily) sees Lena at school get in trouble.

Lena at school? Emily sees Lena get in trouble?

But Emily doesn’t tell other people. She just sees Lena be bad. She thinks that Lena is just really shy. And she thinks Lena is sad.

Hm, sad. Why sad?

Because she got in trouble and Emily knows that.
How did your friends at school and Emily the Butterfly treat Lena when she got in trouble?

They still liked her. It was after her consequences. And Emily the Butterfly still likes her.

Did your friends at school think it was ok for Emily to still like Lena too?

They don’t know about her; they really don’t.

Do any of the kids at school know her?

Just me.

Do any of your teachers know her?

Nope.

Does she talk at school?

Ah, she has to sit in, at the circle, and you have to be quiet. You have to be quiet in circle.

Circle is a quiet time?

Yeah, and she’s shy. She’s very shy.

Oh, she’s shy. Are you shy too?

(Nods yes.)

Do you know anyone else who is shy?

Some kids at my school.

So Emily goes to school but is quiet there. Does anyone know she’s there?

Nobody sees her, just me. They can’t see her, because they don’t even know that she’s really even there.
How do you know she’s there?

*Because, ah, I don’t figure that one out really. I just know.*

During our discussions about real and imaginary friends, Tory talked at length about positive experiences, enjoyable activities, and typical playtime with her friends at school. For Tory, social interaction and play with friends begins as soon as she boards the school bus. During the short bus rides to and from school, Tory and her friends play simple guessing games about words and numbers, talk quietly, look out the window, or sleep. At school, the Head Start Pre-K day includes both teacher directed curriculum-based play and free play of the child’s choice. A favorite shared pastime is the children’s playful adaptation of story reading that Tory described as:

*At the library corner, we, ah, ah, we just read stories. But we make up the words, because none of us can really read. And we pretend the story books say what we read because we don’t really, really know, unless it’s one that the teachers read to us before. And then we can remember it. So you can kind of make up some parts.*

*Yeah, I do it like a movie, and I make up the voices, and it’s so really fun.*

Other play activities enjoyed during the school day at the time of this study include building castles and bridges, attacking with dragons, and re-enacting garbage and recycling practices. As our conversation about pretend games and playing with friends continued, Tory not only offered important
details of pretend play with real friends at school, but also a direct recognition of the imaginary friend status of Emily the Butterfly. The conversation follows:

Do you play any pretend games on the bus or tell stories?

*Some games like we guess what we’re thinking about, or a number, or something. But we mostly play pretend games in our school.*

With whom?

*Oh, Allison, and Jill, and Lena. And Emily.*

Did you tell me – let’s see – Lena, Jill, Allison, Pete, Hallie – did you tell me you had an Emma or Emily at your school?

*Yeah, 2 girls at my school. I have Emily and Emma. Emma is in kindergarten now. But I have an Emily in my class.*

Emily – you mean Emily the Butterfly?

*No, the real Emily at my school. She’s a girl, but I have Emily the Butterfly too. So, that’s 3 really (counting on fingers) – Emma, Emily the real girl, and Emily the Butterfly. That’s 3.*

In addition to play with Emily the Butterfly and school friends, Tory enjoys pretense and imaginative play with her parents. Her mother reported a recent shared quest play episode where they both were wearing bathrobes, roller skates, and helmets; this episode was interrupted by a surprised UPS delivery man. The mother also provided details of Tory’s ritual play in navigating the area rugs in the bathroom-laundry room. Tory jumps from rug to rug or from the sink to the washing machine to avoid falling into the hot lava. This play scenario is
repeated every time Tory leaves the bathroom-laundry, and the mother is a participant from the sidelines. Another example both parents cited was shared family play with a large cardboard box. The box was a castle one day, a rocket with astronauts the next day, and later that week it had become a dump truck for recycling. During a school field trip to a fish hatchery, Tory and her parents pretended that the gold rainbow trout were magic. Another day the family played with bubbles, and the bubbles were transformed into captured people. Tory’s mother explained their bubble play and accompanying conversation to me as:

Right now, because it’s been getting warmer, we’ve been doing a lot of bubble activities. And I think we’re trying to do that there are fairies in the bubbles and they need popped.

Uh-huh, like burst?

Yeah, they are trapped and we had to go and release as many fairies as we could from the bubbles.

Was that your idea to pop the bubbles or hers (Tory’s)?

Hers. It was her idea.

Did she decide that there were fairies inside the bubbles?

She said that there were people inside of them, and I said then they’ll fall.

She said, oh, we’ll give them some wings.

Like other pretend play scenarios the family creates, the bubble play became more complicated with each episode as Tory and her mother created character descriptions and roles for many bubble fairies.
Described as imaginative and creative by her parents, Tory is adept at filling her time with play. For instance, our conversation about waiting in line at the store is as follows:

If you’re waiting in line at the store, do you ever pretend in your head?

*Sometimes, but usually my dad plays games with me. I play with Daddy, and when we’re waiting we play this knuckles game and you can get a little bump, or we play rock, paper, scissors. Or we do this* (slap hands, 1-1, 1-2. Etc...). *Daddy’s hands are bigger, but I’m really quick. Sometimes he lets me win, but I win a lot, really. Sometimes he’s just stays there so I can do it myself. I trick him, and he says “Ow, ow!” But it doesn’t really hurt him; he’s just pretending. I know it all the time. Like a wolf, “Ow-oo, ow-oo.”*

Our conversations often combined the concepts of mental imagery, detailed personal experience, and deep emotion. The conversation provided here was initiated by Tory at the beginning of our second Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview:

*Hey, you want to know something scary? When I was at the beach, the beach house where we were outside, a wave that was very high came, and it got me a little bit – the ocean did it.*

Ah, the ocean waves.

*I really don’t like swimming in the ocean; it’s so big. Sometimes I go to (unclear names), and I swim in their swimming pool.*
That sounds like fun. Do you like the pool or the ocean best?

*The pool is better, as you can see the water. You can see through the water and not get lost like you could in the ocean water. You know – the waves.*

So you can see in the water in the swimming pool?

*Uh-huh, once I had goggles on, and I swimmied with my hands and went under, under, ah, ah, a bed that was made of inflatable stuff. I swimmied under it because it was laid out like that (arms reaching wide). I went like that (swooshing noise) and went a long glide in the water. I think it was 45 minutes or something like that.*

Wow, 45 minutes.

*Well, I can’t tell time very well, yet. Maybe it was longer or shorter, I don’t know. My eyes were still closed even though I had goggles. They were blue – I mean the goggles (laughing).*

That’s a good story about swimming.

*Yeah, it’s true, because I really, really remember it, and I was very scared. The water would not stop coming at me. I like swimming pools better.*

As our discussion continued, I questioned Tory about her private mental play. She offered a clear explanation about daydreaming:

*Do you know what daydreaming is?*
Oh yeah, you look at something and if someone calls you, you don’t hear them. And you look like this (vacant, unblinking stare). Pete does it at school, and the teacher says "Pete, stop daydreaming." I heard her say that. And he was just looking and looking.

Do you ever daydream?

No.

No, never?

No, I’m too busy thinking about things, like when we sit in our rectangles at school. We don’t have desks, so we sit in a circle on our rectangles. And then I’m thinking, but not daydreaming, because then you can get in trouble.

Later, we expanded this conversation about daydreaming and transitioned to talking about vivid dreams and mental imagery.

So do you know what Pete was daydreaming about today?

No, that’s his business. I can’t tell.

Did the teacher know?

She just knew he was daydreaming because he didn’t hear his name, and he looked like this (stares, unblinking).

And you don’t daydream?

No.

Do you night dream?
Yeah, sometimes I have night dreams, and sometimes they’re actually nightmares.

Like what?

You remember I told you about the ocean thing? Well, I dream about I get lost at the ocean (shivering), and (whispering) it is so scary. I have to go to Mommy and Daddy’s room.

Sounds like you were really scared.

Well, I thought I was at the ocean. Daddy said it was just a dream.

Well, do you ever pretend for fun in your bed, like before you fall asleep? Oh, yeah, but it’s not a dream really. I turn the blanket into mountains, and there’s a volcano, and dinosaurs, and other creatures. That’s not scary; it’s my bed. I make it have lava.

Following this admission, I directed our conversation back to mental imagery and asked:

Is that what you think about before you fall asleep?

Sometimes I do. I like to think about princesses and maybe, skating backwards really, really, fast – like almost really, really flying. And my skates are flashing and sparkling a lot. That’s all I think about.

Do you ever pretend to be an animal or a superhero?

Sometimes I pretend to be a puppy, and I bark like this (woofing and panting).

Do you ever pretend to be a superhero like Spiderman or Catwoman?
No. I don’t want to talk about that stuff. I don’t do it.

While Tory often pretends that she is a princess, a dog, or a garbage recycling employee, she is not interested in superhero or supernatural play, and her parents confirmed this information. Our further discussion concerning mental imagery centered on unfamiliar people and unexplained ideas and is as follows:

Some kids make up stories about people they see but don’t really know.

Do you ever make up pretend stories about people you see?

Like the lady who looked like a witch? Mommy said she couldn’t help it, and she wasn’t really a witch. No, I don’t do that.

Have you ever wondered how clouds get in the sky or why fish don’t get all wrinkly in the water like we do? What kinds of things do you wonder about?

I know about clouds. We studied them in school. And I did see real clouds really, really very, very high up in the sky when we were in the airplane. I was wondering if, if the airplane could ah, ah, maybe like (pause) fall down, but Mommy said it had lots of gas. Not a chance. So I’m not wondering about anything right now.

Narrative Production Tasks #1-5

Narrative Production Task #1- Story Listening and Retelling:

For Tory’s story listening and retelling task, she chose the picturebook Little Rabbit Waits for the Moon, by Beth Shoshan (2004). Shoshan’s picturebook tells the story of Little Rabbit’s fear of the night. The cheery description of daytime,
warm and bright, offers reassuring basis for the contrasting portrayal of the dark and empty night. My analysis recognizes that Little Rabbit is afraid to fall asleep in the dark. The text explains that no one is watching over him. Using reasonable childhood problem solving with which young readers can identify, Little Rabbit decides to wait for the moon. It is difficult to wait, and Little Rabbit sets out to discover how much longer he may have to wait for the moon’s arrival. He asks a tender flower, a shimmering lake, and a wind-tossed leaf; each request is unsatisfactory. Following each encounter, Shoshan uses the repetitive mantra “just to be sure” to urge the Little Rabbit to the next stop on his search. The Little rabbit continues on his journey and seeks out a winding path and rolling hills, but in his fatigue he misses the rise of a perfect moon. With the moon watching over him, Little Rabbit falls asleep dreaming of the moon.

Stephanie Peel crafts dreamy acrylic illustrations of softly muted bright hues. I believe that her use of daylight and moonlight is compelling; the shimmering moonlight is an effective contrast to the bright energy of the daytime sunlight. Peel’s skies transition to deeper murkiness and the Little Rabbit walks deeper into his journey. Motifs like the winding road, blowing leaves, and pointing branches propel the plot and invite the reader to turn the page. When sleepiness overcomes the Little Rabbit, he falls asleep beneath a glimmering, protective moon. The final illustration shows a large, luminous globe hovering protectively over Little Rabbit, who is finally secure in his slumber and dreams.
For Tory’s first narrative production task, I could envision possibilities for interpretive retelling in *Little Rabbit Waits for the Moon*. An identifiable rabbit character, a personal quest, and simple but rich illustrations offer the young reader the opportunity to enter the story. Iconic symbols, such as the winding road and day to night transition, combine with traditional elements like blowing leaves to move the plot and the reader forward. Even though the book is recommended for toddlers, vocabulary words like “fierce”, “shimmered”, and “promising” elevate the text and increase its appropriateness for older children like Tory. The topics of night fear and being alone are also more sophisticated. These strategies of effective storytelling are also supportive measures for accurate retelling. For these reasons, I approved *Little Rabbit Waits for the Moon* as a developmentally appropriate choice for Tory’s story listening and retelling.

As Tory and I sat down to share the book *Little Rabbit Waits for the Moon* (Shoshan, 2004), I suggested that she could listen to the story while I read it to her. Tory had pre-determined ideas about shared story reading; our conversation follows:

If you want to say anything about the story as I read it, that’s OK. When the story is done, I’ll ask you to tell it to me.

*Do I need to have right answers?*

Right answers?

*Yeah, remember the right answers, like at my school.*
You can just tell back the story that you remember, like what you remember from the words and the pictures.

*Well, at school we usually don’t talk during the story. We talk at the end.*

Is that how you would like to do it now?

*Uh-huh, I’ll talk at the end. That’s how we do it.*

I read the story to Tory, and she did not talk during the story except to grab her arms and shiver when the “rolling hills” talked. Tory began her retelling of the story by skipping the cover and title page, and then she smoothed her hands over the first page of the story and pointed to the illustration on the facing page. She repeated the smoothing and pointing ritual with each turn of the page. For most of the story, her voice was calm and modulated, but Tory dropped her tone to a whisper when the mountains were shaking, and her voice was almost mournful at her acknowledgment that no one was taking care of the Little Rabbit. Her full retelling follows:

*There was a little rabbit what could not get to sleep.*

*There’s the sun, and it’s sunny.*

*But at the night, the sky falls down.*

*Little rabbit said, “As I get to sleep, nobody is watching me, and I have to find the moon.”*  

*So he just sat down.*

*Then he went to find help with waiting. Because there’s no moon.*  

*And the little flower, just like the Little Rabbit, he’s not growed up either.*
The little flower might grow bigger and bigger and turn into a tree or something, and the moon is not coming for a long time.

So the Little rabbit went to discover someone else to ask about where the moon is.

He wanted to be sure, really, sure about it.

When the moon was coming back.

Here’s the picture of the lake shimmering.

But the moon did not get in the water.

Little Rabbit went to find someone else.

Just to be sure.

They said that a lot.

Then he found a long little road called a path.

And the Little Rabbit walked a long way on the path that talked.

And he kept going to ask somebody else to be sure.

The wind was blowing very hard.

All the leaves were blowing around the Little Rabbit.

And I still don’t see the moon.

So, then he did the same thing he always does.

He keeps going to ask someone else.

To be sure.

He does it to be sure, because he is not sure yet.

Oh the mountains are shaking (shivering noises).
We can see everything and even we can see all the roads and stuff.

Look at poor Little Rabbit.

He is scared now.

And it’s kinda dark.

And then, the moon comes up in the picture.

The moon came in the sky.

And here is the lake and the path what’s like a little road.

And even the little flower is there when the moon comes in the sky.

We call that rising.

The moon is rising.

And there is the moon, and everything’s all right now.

But the Little Rabbit is not in this picture.

Why can’t the Little Rabbit be in this picture?

Oh, oh I remember.

Here is the Little Rabbit, and he is sleeping now.

That’s why he wasn’t in that other picture so he can be asleep here.

But the moon sees the Little Rabbit.

The moon doesn’t have any eyes on it.

I think the moon is dreaming.

They said dreaming, remember.

No, wait.

The Little Rabbit is dreaming now, because he is sure now.
He is sure he can go to sleep, because he is sure about the moon in the sky.

And that’s the end, but it doesn’t say anything about happily ever after.

That’s another story, like Beauty and the Beast.

Well, authors write books, you know.

They’re called authors.

Usually, authors and book writers say “they lived happily ever after” but they don’t have to, only if they want to.

I didn’t like that he was Little Rabbit and he’s all by himself.

Except for the flower and the path and like the shimmering lake that shines and stuff.

Because it was bedtime, and nobody’s taking care of him.

That’s all.

**Narrative Production Task #2 Script Production**

Tory’s mother or I provided a snack or lunch for sessions that followed Tory’s morning Head Start class. Tory would settle in, and the food revived her. Often, I used our shared dining as the context for interview questions or short narrative production tasks. On the day of script production tasks, Tory and I began our session by building castles from slices of cheese and small crackers; then we attacked the castles with celery sticks and ate all the ruins. The narrative production task #2 scripts were created by Tory during this session. My prompts for scripts #1, 2, & 3 were simple; for instance, I asked Tory to tell me
how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. However, when I asked Tory to
tell me how to give a dog a bath for script prompt #4, she assumed the lead and
transformed the script narrative into a personal event narrative. I discuss this at
length in the assessment of narrative that follows script #4. All script productions
are presented in their entirety followed by my assessment of Tory’s narrative
script productions.

Script #1

I tried to make one on my own once – a peanut butter and jelly one.
Well, start with bread cut in triangles.
Then you put jelly and peanut butter on.
Then you just (slap, slap, clap, clap, clap) and eat it.
You can put it on a paper towel or a plate.
And that’s it.
It’s mm, mm.

Script #2

I help mommy make lunch and dinner sometimes, like snow pea pods.
They’re green. Oh and we make smoothies.
Sometimes we have smoothies for dinner.
If it’s just my mom and me, sometimes we just have smoothies.
You put fruit and milk and Greek yogurt in it, and mostly fruit.
You can put bananas, blueberries, strawberries, cantaloupe, pineapple in it.
We made a smoothie that was made of all kind of different fruits, but it tasted like it was just pineapple and blueberries.

And I’ll make smoothies sometimes, just (blending noises) it up and drink (slurping noises).

Script #3

My bed is in my room and it has a princess crown with, ah, ah, jewels that are white.

And it’s a pink princess crown, and it has something that you put a little TV on or a tablet or food so you can eat there.

Or you could watch videos or play games.

I help my mom clean it.

Well, you vacuum it, but first put all your toys somewhere like inside a bench or on the shelves.

Make it neat, so you don’t have to do it again.

Oh yeah, you make your bed and smooth it.

I’m maybe gonna get a TV in my room once I really sleep in it.

I think probably you just dust a TV, but I’m not sure.

That’s all about cleaning.

Script #4

I’ll tell you about the time we had to give a bath to Piper because of all the sticky dirt.

That’s a funny thing.
Most people like to get in the bathtub, but dogs don’t.

We had to get Piper in the bathtub.

That was bad.

Then we put in the water and shampoo, and it went everywhere because Piper was shaking it out, and it was all over.

We couldn’t even do the rinsing.

We rubbed and rubbed with my beach towel, the old one with Ariel on it.

And we couldn’t even make all the fur dry with it.

We just opened the door, and dad let Piper out.

Then we had to clean up the bathroom, because it was everywhere.

And that’s how to give a dog a bath, but don’t do it in the winter.

It was bad, terrible bad.

And we were wet.

**Narrative Production Task #3- Personal Event Narrative (PENS)**

The prompts for Narrative Production Tasks #1-3 Personal Event Narratives (PEN) were selected from topics suggested by Tory’s mother. The family’s recent vacation provided a rich collection of experiences for Tory, so I designed several prompts around it. The final personal event narrative, PEN #4, occurred spontaneously during the Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play Interview.

**PEN #1:**
OK, well, we had to get up really early in the morning.

Actually, it was still night, and my grandma took us to the airport because we had to let our car be at home.

We had our suitcases and I think a tote bag too.

We gave the people, the ones with suits on, we gave them our papers.

Then we walked on the airplane.

We actually, we rode in two different airplanes – a big one and a little one.

On one airplane Mommy and I sat together, but Daddy had to sit behind us, but on the other plane we sat all together.

My head had a little headache when we went up in the sky, but not so much, because I was really tired.

I already told you that it was still in the night. We went up in the clouds, really, really up so high.

We were inside the clouds, and they look like ice cream or something, or maybe like potatoes.

You know mashed potatoes.

We had to ride for a long time, but in the middle we got off the plane and got onto another plane.

I think that’s the one where we all sat together.

We ate food and they give different food and drinks to you, even like juice boxes and snacks.
Then, we came down out of the sky and that’s all.

**PEN #2:**

We stayed at a hotel, a real one.

It had two beds, and the door opened, I think, with a credit card, like that.

We didn’t even have to pay, because my grandma paid for everything.

It was a present; our hotel was a present too.

It was big with two beds and a really pretty bathroom, but we didn’t do any swimming. I don’t know if it had a swimming pool or not, but there were a lot of swimming pools at Florida.

We saw a lot of swimming pools.

But, oh, we took naps when we got there, maybe it was a little later, because we were all so tired.

**PEN #3:**

You can stay there a long time, because the stuff is all over the place.

There’s little towns, and rides like roller coasters and trees that pretend to talk, and people and kids dressed up in costumes.

There was a lot of music, but it was nice.

I had a lot of favorites.

I really liked all the princesses, because you know I like princesses.

I liked the dwarves and riding in the boat in the cave too.

I think Ellen’s Nightmare was the best thing.
You have to understand it, because it is a little creepy.

There were some dinosaurs and monsters and like swirly colors things.

You go through it like in a wind-y way and all these different things come to you. They’re right there.

It’s supposed to be inside Ellen’s head.

It is supposed to be her bad dream.

And I really don’t like bad dreams.

They’re called nightmares.

That’s why they call it Ellen’s Nightmare.

I don’t like nightmares. I like Ellen.

I know her, so- even as it’s scary for me, it’s not.

I think it was OK.

I don’t have any more to say about that.

PEN #4

Hey, you want to know something scary?

When I was at the beach, the beach house where we were outside, a wave that was very high came, and it got me a little bit – the ocean did it.

I really don’t like swimming in the ocean; it’s so big.

Sometimes I go to Doc’s, and I swim in their swimming pool.

The pool is better, as you can see the water.

You can see through the water and not get lost like you could in the ocean water.
You know – the waves.

Once I had goggles on, and I swimmmed with my hands and went under, under, ah, ah, a bed that was made of inflatable stuff.

I swimmmed under it because it was laid out like that.

I went like that - swoosh and went a long glide in the water.

I think it was 45 minutes or something like that.

Well, I can’t tell time very well, yet.

Maybe it was longer or shorter, I don’t know.

My eyes were still closed even though I had goggles.

They were blue – I mean the goggles.

Yeah, it’s true, because I really, really remember it, and I was very scared.

The water would not stop coming at me.

I like swimming pools better.

**Narrative Production Task #4a: Storytelling with Researcher**

**Prompt**

So, there was this little puppy who could really talk.

He could fly too, because he was a flying puppy that could talk.

His ears flapped for the wings - flap, flap.

He lived in Paris in an apartment.

He went to sleep in his bed after he flew there.
He was sleeping in his apartment with the door all locked up because there was a robber downstairs.

And he got a boo-boo.

He got a green cast like Austin; he really got a green cast once.

He got his owner, because he got super strengths.

Then, he carried his owner all the way to Pennsylvania; actually he flew.

He's can fly remember.

At the end, they found a new apartment without robbers, and they lived there.

They had a picnic with muffins and cake and green beans and chicken.

When the rain stopped- it was raining- there was a rainbow.

There’s lots of rainbows in stories, but they’re real too.

Like if it rains and it’s sun too, there can be a rainbow, so that part can be real.

So, that’s the end.

**Narrative Production Task #4b: Story Telling without Researcher Prompt**

Tory produced one story telling without researcher prompt that she based on The Three Little Pigs and her applied story experience from school that morning. Tory’s story is grammatically well organized, rich in descriptive detail, and reveals psychological causation, but it is an adaptation of a very familiar tale. For this reason, it is included here as additional narrative information for the
reader, but it is not later assessed as an original example of storytelling without researcher prompt.

_I’ll tell you this one from school today._

_I brought the pictures to show you, so I could tell you._

_We had to color them and then cut them, because it tells a story._

_They’re story cards._

_See, this is one of the three little pigs._

_He’s a pig in the story, see?_  

_Do you like this basket?_  

_It’s next to their houses._  

_They lived in- they had a stick house, and a brick one, and a regular one, like twigs or grass or something._  

_A hay one like that._  

_They went to the hay one, the house, and it got huffed and puffed down._  

_The wolf did it._  

_He said, “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down.”_  

_And he did it to._  

_But before that the little pigs said, “Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin.”_  

_I like that part, because it rhymes._  

_It’s funny too._
Yeah, he blew their house down, the hay, the straw one, not the brick house yet.

They ran really fast to the stick house.

It was already there.

They were at the wood one then, the wood house made up like sticks.

See here?

But the wolf followed them and started shouting at them – it was the same thing again.

"Let me in, just let me in." And they said, "Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin."

And the wolf said, "Then, I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down."

He blew the house down.

They all ran to the next house; that was the brick one.

And the wolf came again.

But they’re out of houses now.

This is the last one.

The wolf said the same thing like before.

"Little pig, little pig, let me come in."

They said, the pigs said, "Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin."

So the wolf said, then I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down."
But, it didn’t work, because it’s a brick house, and he, the wolf, didn’t have enough breath.

I’m glad.

He’s mean to the pigs.

But they’re smart, and they cooked up really hot water over the fire like the one at Pap’s house.

The wolf, he was still yelling and climbing up the chimney.

Then he went down the chimney, but the pigs caught him in the hot water.

Ouch, ooh, ooh – and he died.

He was cooked and dead.

Narrative Production Task#5: Story Listening and Extension

For Narrative Production Task #5 Story Listening and Extension, I chose the postmodern picturebook *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* by John Burningham (Random House, 1977). Postmodernism is, quite simply, the rejection of a “grand narrative” which explains all; postmodern art is largely ironic and non-specific in nature. These qualities predispose authors and illustrators to create “… a garden of the picturebook (which) is a riot of strange hybrids and glorious mutations” (Lewis, p.76). Play is life and learning for young children, and picturebooks can provide a medium for playfulness within the act of acquiring language and literacy. Lewis writes, “Unlike writers for more mature and accomplished readers, writers and illustrators of picturebooks address an
audience for whom what counts as reading and what can legitimately go into a book are concepts that are still being learned” (p.77). Lewis goes on to argue a solid case for the role of play in acquiring language and literacy. I believe play and postmodernism art techniques serve each other well as picturebook enablers.

In *Come away from the Water, Shirley*, the mother’s continual parental dialogue becomes a monologue when Shirley immediately enters her own imaginary pirate play world. This separate and distinct portrayal of parent and child worlds is drawn by the act of play. Mother never enters Shirley’s mental world of constructed narrative. This indeterminate technique is so effective that I accepted what was going on in the characters’ minds. However, I expected that my child-participants might pose uneasy questions concerning the disparity in the parent-child relationship shown in the illustrations because the images subvert the text of the story. Burningham’s juxtaposition of text and picture weaves a family portrait of moody indetermination that I predicted would encourage the cognitive tension necessary for my child-participants to create an extension of the story (Swartz, 2009). *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* is a developmentally appropriate picture book and is recommended for children of 3-7 years of age.

Narrative Production Task #5 was my original design, so I was very interested in Tory’s resulting narrative. Because of the exploratory nature of this
task, and to ensure transparency, I present the experience in its entirety here. I introduced the Story Listening and Extension to Tory as:

So, I’ll read a story to you. When the story is done, you can tell me what would happen if the story kept on going. You can make up the rest if the story. It’s called, “Come Away from the Water, Shirley.”

Oh, is the girl’s name Shirley? Oh wait, maybe the dog is Shirley. I hope it’s the dog.

Well, let’s find out. It’s written by John Birmingham. Do you want to talk about the story while I read it to you?

No, we don’t do that at my school. Remember, we listen, and then we talk at the end.

So, you want to do it like that or different this time?

No, I want to do it like my school.

OK, I’ll read the story to you. Remember, you can keep the story going when I’m done.

I read the story to Rory, and she listened silently. When I finished, Tory asked:

So, I’ll tell you what comes next, right?

Right, you just tell me and I’ll listen all the way through like you did.

That’s it. If the story kept on going, what would happen? Tell me the story. Tory’s story extension is as follows:

Well, you see, there’s this girl Shirley- oh it’s “Come Away from the Water Shirley.”
She went to the seashore with her mom and dad, but she does her own thing.

Nobody knows about it really.

They just boss her around, her mom does, but Shirley is having some other things to do.

She’s thinking, making up, about pirates and ah, ah playing it.

See this picture – where she’s, Shirley, is getting pulled away from the beach by her mom.

Well, her mom is not really seeing her, because the real Shirley and her dog are on a pirate ship, and they’re sailing really, really fast across the ocean.

They’re going far away to another beach to dig up some stuff like treasure for real. And they find maps and swords, and the dog finds some other dog friends there.

But the mom takes some other little girl- she can’t know her, from the beach home, because she doesn’t even look at Shirley.

They get home, and the mom says “Where is Shirley?”

Then they all go back to the beach and look across the ocean, and, and here comes Shirley and the dog.

They aren’t worried now.

The dog is bringing his friends and all the treasure.

That’s the end of it.
Artistic and Dramatic Productions

Artistic Expression Production Task#1: Emily the Butterfly

During our first interview session, Tory drew a picture of her imaginary companion. While she provided specific artistic details which were reflected in her description of Emily the Butterfly, Tory also produced targeted advice for me as a researcher:

Tell me about this drawing. What do you want me to know about your picture?

*Well, this is Emily the Butterfly. She is my friend, and I can see her, because here I just drew her like she really is. She is very beautiful with sparkle and shiny things. If you had some really good crayons, like the sparkly kind, I could really draw a good one for you. You could look at Wal Mart or CVS sometime.*

So, if you had sparkly crayons right now, where would the sparkle be?

*See these round purple parts – they would be very shiny and sparkle a lot.*

*It would not even have to be in the daytime. Oh, oh- and this paper is kinda little. It should be really big because Emily the Butterfly is really big.*

*I showed you before, remember?*

Yes, you did show how big Emily is. Is there anything else you would like to say about your picture?

*This is Emily, but you should buy some better crayons.*
Artistic Expression Production Task#2: Friends to Play With at School

Drawing and coloring often provided the activity context for our interviews. For example, while Tory was responding to my questions about her friends, she created this drawing. Her explanation follows:

*So this is Pete. We play together at school, and we play with Lena too.*

*This is Lena, and she has leggings and a skirt. Pete has a dinosaur sweatshirt. He wears it all the time, or sometimes, I don’t know. We’re all laughing. But Lena is swinging around.*
Tell me where you are.

I’m drawing the picture.

Figure 2: Friends to Play with at School

**Artistic Expression Production Task#3: I Think about Princesses**

Tory expressed her interest in pretense, Disney fairy tale stories, and princesses. The following conversation took place on the quiet day when Tory was tired and requested that we *just chill and color*.

Wow, what a collection of princesses.

*Uh-huh, I know about all the important princesses and their names and everything. These are Disney girls, princesses, like I said. There are other*
princesses, as Pocahontas was a real princess, but Disney made her different. She’s in their story now.

So, what would you like me to know about your princess picture?

Well, see they’re really smart and have good plans to get out of trouble. And see her hair and stuff—she’s really beautiful (pointing to Arora). And this is Belle, she can read lots of books, and she saves people. And here is Arielle, she is a mermaid, but you can be a mermaid and a princess too.

Figure 3: I Think about Princesses
Artistic Expression Production Task#4: My Friend Allison

Tory talked about playing with Allison at school that morning and thought it would *make a good picture for our book*. Her explanation of play with Allison is included here:

So tell me about this picture, please.

*This is Allison, my friend at school. Today we were hopping around. It was like dancing. See, she likes it.*

Oh, she likes hopping around with you.

*Yes, see, she’s smiling at me.*

Is there anything else you’d like to say about your drawing of Allison?

*No, she’s just Allison, that’s all.*

Figure 4: My Friend Allison
Dramatic Production Task #1: Presenting Emily the Butterfly

I had carefully planned several dramatic production prompts to encourage Tory to engage in pretend play with her imaginary companion in our research context. Like so many other instances, my guidance was not necessary as Tory assumed the lead in her own dramatic productions. Provided here are two striking incidents of play with her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly.

The first dramatic production occurred during our initial meeting when Tory ran into the hallway and returned with Emily the Butterfly. Tory held Emily’s hand and spoke quietly to her. Tory’s mother expressed surprise at the arrival of Emily the Butterfly, but Tory explained she (Emily) came because it’s about her, and she knows that. There was no further play demonstration with Emily until the conclusion of our meeting when Tory announced that Emily had gone home. Later, her mother told me that Tory had never before publicly introduced Emily the Butterfly.

Dramatic Production Task #2: Sharing Emily the Butterfly

A few weeks into our research sessions, Tory arrived at the inn pretending to hold someone’s hand and whispering. Just then her aunt and young cousin, Kyleigh, entered the dining room where we held our sessions and asked if we would like to try the soup de jour. While Tory’s mother, aunt, and I observed, Tory told Kyleigh that there was a lot of research work to do today. She said, Kyleigh please take Emily the Butterfly into the kitchen to babysit, ok? Kyleigh
nodded, held out her hand to Emily the Butterfly, and escorted her through the swinging kitchen doors. Both the aunt and Tory’s mother were open-mouthed with surprise and reported that neither had ever witnessed such a demonstration by Tory or Kyleigh. Later, when I asked Tory if Kyleigh knew about Emily the Butterfly, Tory replied *she does now.*

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Chapter 4 presents the full case study of Tory and her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to offer the exploratory case study as it unfolded. Interviews, observations, narrative task productions, and artistic and dramatic productions are included. Data drawn from interviews and observations tell a rich, compelling story about Tory, her life, and play with Emily the Butterfly. All Tory’s narrative task productions are included as full transcripts. A collection of Tory’s artistic and dramatic productions completes the Chapter 4 presentation of the case study of Tory and Emily the Butterfly.

Deep analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative is conducted later in Chapter 6 within the framework of answering the research questions, but the aim here is to allow the reader to construct a personal understanding of Tory through her own words.
Chapter Five

Case Study Two: Kyleigh

Introduction to Chapter 5

Chapter 5 presents the case study of Kyleigh and her imaginary companions, Nile and Didi. Kyleigh’s mother and father also participated in this case study. As with Chapter 4, the purpose of Chapter 5 is to offer the exploratory case study as it unfolded; to best tell the story of Kyleigh, and her imaginary companions Nile and Didi, I have adopted a creative narrative writing stance. Interviews, observations, narrative task productions, and artistic and dramatic productions are included. Data drawn from interviews and observations tell a rich, compelling story about Kyleigh, her life, and play with Nile and Didi. Direct quotations from Kyleigh and her parents are delivered in *italics* throughout the chapter. All Kyleigh’s narrative task productions are included as full transcripts. A collection of Kyleigh’s artistic and dramatic productions completes the Chapter 4 presentation of the case study of Kyleigh, Nile, and Didi. Deep analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative is conducted later in Chapter 6, but the aim here is to allow the reader to construct a personal understanding of Kyleigh through her own words.
Meeting Kyleigh

I met Kyleigh in the research setting of the local inn as I was working with Child-Participant #1, Tory. Tory and Kyleigh are first cousins; their mothers are sisters. The mothers are my nieces, and therefore, Tory and Kyleigh are my great-nieces. Although Kyleigh and I had met at a large family wedding reception when she was 2 years of age, according to her mother, Kyleigh had no recollection of our meeting. At that time, Kyleigh was dressed in tulle as a flower girl, had shed her shoes, and was covered in chocolate icing. Now nearly two years later, Kyleigh ran through the foyer of the inn screaming that her brother had eaten all the doughnuts. Clad in pajama bottoms and fleece boots, she was well decorated with strawberry jelly and powdered sugar. Clearly, the accusation of her brother’s theft of all the jelly doughnuts was not substantiated by the physical evidence. Kyleigh’s mother intervened while several patrons chuckled over their lunch. The jelly doughnut claim was suspended, and Kyleigh and her brother went to the kitchen to eat chicken. Soon Kyleigh, fully dressed, returned and explained to Tory and me, *make sure you’re wear a shirt in here. People go to jail for no shirts.* I assured her that I would follow her advice.

Following the referral given by Tory’s mother, I talked at length with Kyleigh’s parents about imaginary companion play. I met with Kyleigh and her parents to provide information and gain consent. For the next ten weeks, I
worked solely on data collection with Tory. When the case study data collection with Tory was concluded, then Kyleigh and I began working together. Even though the two case studies did not overlap in the collection of data, the social contexts certainly were connected. During my research work with Tory, Kyleigh occasionally wandered through or played in the inn while her mother and father were working. Because the family home was next door to the inn, the children went back and forth regularly. Kyleigh’s parents had explained that Tory and I were working on research, and our privacy was generally respected by Kyleigh. Twice, at Tory’s request, Kyleigh joined Tory and me while we read a story or played a storytelling game. Kyleigh was obviously delighted to be included and participated wholeheartedly.

Kyleigh and I continued to interact within the context of time before or after my sessions with Tory. I arrived early in anticipation that Kyleigh might be at the inn, and we would talk and sometimes play with her newborn brother, Jem. During one of these visits, Kyleigh sat with me on the steps of the veranda while I was waiting for Tory and her mother to arrive for our final session. The afternoon sun warmed our faces, and Kyleigh smiled up at me and leaned against my arm. Our first conversation about imaginary companion play occurred then, and it was a simple, natural exchange. It follows:

Quite earnestly, she said, *you know, I could tell you some stories for your book. I know about friends what’s pretend. I know about it like Tory.*

Oh, pretend friends? I asked.
Yeah, hers is.

Do you talk about them to anybody, like your mom or dad? I continued.

*No, well maybe just a tiny much. Mostly they’re just my friends, like Didi.*

*Hers is just mine.*

Just then, Tory and her mother arrived, and Kyleigh started toward home with her teenage sister. Turning around, Kyleigh called back to me:

*No forgetting, ok?*

Ok, I’ll write it down for us.

The next Tuesday, Kyleigh was waiting on the steps and asked to see the book where I wrote her words. She was not forgetting.

**Background of Kyleigh and her Parents**

Kyleigh is a preschool female aged 3 years 10 months at the initiation of data collection. Kyleigh celebrated her fourth birthday during the course of the study. Living in a two parent household with her natural parents, Kyleigh is the fourth child in a busy family of five children. She has three older siblings (a sister and two brothers who range in age from 10-13 yrs) and a newborn brother. The older siblings are from her mother’s previous marriage, and the mother and ex-husband share custody of these children. All five children live together in the central household during the week; most weekends the older three children go to stay with their natural father. During those weekends, Kyleigh and her baby brother remain in the central household with their mother and father, the mother’s second husband. With more than sixty cousins, Kyleigh experiences
visits and trips with her extended family, and she enjoys close relationships with her grandparents.

During the period of data collection, Kyleigh was learning to swim and sometimes spoke in a language she called “Spinish.” Near the conclusion of data collection, Kyleigh began Head Start and tearfully described her experience as:

*It is so dumb, and them’s won’t let kids go home when they want. I want to go to cooking school like Mom.*

Kyleigh’s mother has earned two AAS degrees, a B.S. degree, and is currently finishing her M.S. degree. She is a full-time teacher; in addition, the mother works full-time in the same establishment as parent-participants #1. Kyleigh’s father is nearly finished with an AS degree. He too is currently employed full-time in the same establishment as Kyleigh’s mother and both parent-participants #1. Kyleigh’s mother and father shared parent-participant #2 responsibilities during the study.

Cooking, baking, and food craft are important activities shared by Kyleigh’s family. Family members are involved in recipe selections, food preparation, and baking at home. Kyleigh explained that she is the *best helper* in the home kitchen but not allowed to cook at the inn. Kyleigh stressed that her only job at the inn is talking to customers; she pointed out that she is not paid for her work.

The five siblings in Kyleigh’s family range in age from a newborn to 13 years. There is a 5 year gap between Kyleigh and the next older sibling, and
Kyleigh’s only sister is 9 years older, so Kyleigh spends a significant amount of time in solitary play. Her mother reported:

Well she really entertains herself. She’ll be in her room for an hour, just sitting there and talking with her friends and herself. She’s not one of those kids who’s yelling “Mom, Mom” all the time... (and) we know she’s a good story teller.

Kyleigh’s father describes her as independent, really smart, and able to make up interesting characters. Several times, both parents acknowledged Kyleigh’s creativity in imaginative play and storytelling.

**Sessions with Kyleigh**

My relationship with Kyleigh began during short interactions around the data collection with Tory at the inn; these experiences established the social context for subsequent sessions with Kyleigh. At the request of the parents, Kyleigh and I met at the family home, and she fully welcomed me into her home environment. From July 17 through October 14, we met for ten sessions. A parent-participant was in attendance for every session. Sessions varied in length from 60-90 minutes. There were two parent-participant data collection sessions of 90-120 minutes each.

Kyleigh explained to others that we were writing a good book called research. During an early session, her oldest brother sat down at our table with his lunch and a noisy hand-held game. Kyleigh admonished him, Turn that off. We’re working right now. Although she identified it as work, our data collection
sessions were very playful. I believe our playfulness was the reason that she considered us partners. Several times Kyleigh made statements that reflected her perspective that we were equals. The following conversation is a striking example:

So, *is my pap a growed-up?*

Yep.

*And you, too? You a growed-up too? (studying me carefully)*

I am a grown-up; yeah, I’m an adult. (I was coloring a picture and wearing Kyleigh’s plastic beaded necklace.)

*(Shaking her head no.) Nuh uh, I don’t think so.*

Kyleigh understood that she was sharing her *pretend and the other stuff, like Nile and Didi,* she liked knowing that her experiences were important. Seeing me sharing her world of play, coloring and playing dress-up, demonstrated the value of her experiences and helped connect us as partners in research.

As with Tory, I planned research tasks with Kyleigh to be posited within activity and social interaction. Kyleigh and I had tea parties and cooked scrambled eggs. We rocked doll babies, colored pictures, and played games. Together, we created silly songs and read storybooks. I always had developmentally appropriate activities and materials prepared, like rolling play dough or bouncing a ball during a short interview. It was also important for me to recognize Kyleigh’s attention span and orientation to our tasks. For instance, one day I arrived to find the Head Start teachers there for a home visit in
preparation of Kyleigh’s upcoming preschool entrance. Kyleigh was sitting quietly beside her father and coloring a printed image of a Disney character. She was frowning and concentrating on carefully coloring inside the wide, black borders. When the Head Start team left, Kyleigh put the crayons away, sighed heavily, and said:

*No more of coloring, ok?*

Ok with me. What would you like to do?

*Just play dollies, no working.*

Along with my usual collection of preschool materials like play dough, books, and nature items, I had a collection of little character dolls and dollhouse furniture with me. Kyleigh’s eyes lit up when I pulled the dolls from my bag. Our conversation is given here:

So, I brought these little people dolls. I thought maybe you could tell me a story about these people.

*Are these from you house where you live?*

Yep, they are from my house. I have a big dollhouse, and they live inside it.

*You should bring your dollhouse.*

It’s pretty big. You might have to go see it instead of me bringing it to you.

*Ohh, ooh. And these people live there?*

They do. What’s this? (Holding a bed)
That’s a bed. You know. (Giggling)

I bet you could tell me a story about it.

Ok.

As the researcher, I demonstrated respect for Kyleigh by honoring her request to not color; I treated her as an equal partner. She desired doll play, and I offered the little dollies. Kyleigh was pleased and relieved. I combined respect, manipulative toys in which she had an interest, and a playful approach; this combination was a successful developmentally appropriate strategy. We proceeded with Narrative Production Task #4b, Storytelling without Researcher Prompt. In this way, we were able to meld our ideas to function as a plan for completing the goals of the session. We progressed through many of our sessions in a similar manner, negotiating processes and making meaning together.

Interviews and Conversations

Kyleigh identified her imaginary companions, my friends what’s pretend, as Nile and Didi. During interview conversation, Kyleigh described Nile as a tall boy with blond hair. Kyleigh says that while Nile lives at his own house:

Him comes to my house sometimes. And he likes to dance.

Nile likes to dance?

But I don’t dance with him. Him dances by his own self.
What kinds of games do you and Nile like to play?

Like monsters, I guess.

Ooh, monsters? Tell me about the monsters.

Funny monsters. Them not scary. I’m not scared of them.

So not the kind to be afraid of, is that what you mean?

Yeah, we aren’t scared of them.

Tell me what you like about Nile.

Him, he, he likes me. He’s my boyfriend.

It sounds like you like Nile a lot.

Uh-huh (laughing).

Is there anything you don’t like about him?

No, him’s nice.

Kyleigh told me that Nile’s mom drives a van for him, and him, him, he rides a big bike all him’s own. Nile rides a bicycle at school… Yeah, he goes at school around here and far away. Nile even texts Kyleigh on her toy cell phone.

According to the mother:

Yeah, she says he texts her, he was in a car accident, and he’s been in and out of jail. And she came into the restaurant with this little fake, toy phone and said “Oh my gosh, Nile texted me again. He’s doing it all the time.”

I inquired about texting with Nile in the following interview component with Kyleigh:
Your mom told me that you said that Nile texted you.

Yeah, he did that (laughing). On this phone right here, wait, wait (rummages on toy box and shows toy cell phone).

Is this your phone Nile texted you on?

Uh-huh, he does it all the time. I’m always texting him, like to say, come over right now!

What does Nile do when you text him to come over right now?

Him comes (zipping noise) really fast. And, and there him is (pointing).

Well, is Nile here right now?

No, him is busy today. Hims not here.

In response to my question about who would win a bike race, Kyleigh explained that there would be two winners if she and Nile were having a bike race; it would be the same win for us. When I prodded further about Nile’s motivations and behaviors, Kyleigh was forthcoming; our conversation follows:

Does Nile ever do naughty things or get into trouble?

No, him is always good. There’s no bad troubles for him.

Does Nile ever have surprises happen to him?

Well, sometimes, there’s a surprise.

Oh, please tell me about the surprise.

You have dirty glasses. Here, I clean your glasses. Take thems off for me.

(I take off my glasses, and Kyleigh rubs them with a paper towel).

Now you can see me. See?
Thank you. That is so much better.

*Look, I’m cleaning up the juice box too.*

Yes, you are wiping up the drips on the table too. You are taking good care of us.

*I do that by my own self.*

Yes, you do a lot of things by yourself. Do you take care of Nile too?

*Yeah, but sometimes he does stuff. I can’t know about.*

Do you mean like surprises, or good things, or not-so-good things?

*Sometimes not so much that’s good.*

Your mom told me that Nile had to be in jail for a while.

*I don’t think she knows about that. Cause it’s over now.*

The mother and father remembered Kyleigh’s story of Nile’s stint in jail. The mother explained:

*Nile went to jail, but by the next day he was out of jail. And he was in a car accident on the way there too. She makes up such believable stuff with all these details... Her pretend friends seem like real people to her; she treats them like real people. And it’s different than the little stories she makes up now and then.*

As parents of five children, the mother and father are accustomed to and welcoming of pretense and imaginative play, but they recognize that Kyleigh’s imaginary companion play is more complex than the pretend play they have witnessed with their other children. Kyleigh’s mother and father mother reported
that from the age of 2 years, their daughter has consistently engaged in ongoing conversations and play with several imaginary companions. For the past six months, Nile and Didi have been Kyleigh’s steady imaginary companions. All family members have witnessed multiple conversations and play scenarios Kyleigh has with Nile and Didi. Kyleigh has been observed in her bedroom talking with Didi or texting with Nile at the inn, and she has often told her parents that Nile is coming for a visit or that Didi just left. The mother also shared that several employees at the inn are aware of Kyleigh’s imaginary companion play. Extended family relatives like the paternal grandmother have witnessed Kyleigh’s imaginary companion play, and Kyleigh talks openly with family and friends about her pretend friends. The father reported:

*She tells pretty much everyone. She talks to anybody who’ll listen. In fact, obviously people don’t really need to be listening; she talks to people who aren’t there.*

The mother added: *It never goes to the point where we are supposed to actually see him, only she sees Nile.* The mother reported that besides Nile, Kyleigh:

*has other pretend friends too. Didi is one. Sometimes Didi is a cat, sometimes she’s a dog, sometimes she’s a best friend. Sometimes she even changes the name a little bit, like to Dada, but I think it’s all the same person, I mean the same being.*

During Kyleigh’s interview discussions, she consistently identified Didi as *my friend.* Didi and Kyleigh read books together, tells stories, play with dolls, and
roll down the hill in front of the house. I questioned Kyleigh about playing with Didi:

Didi rolled down a hill?

*Uh-huh, we went outside to play. Her said to roll down the hill, so we did it.*

What did that feel like?

*It was so, so fast. And I screamed like this (screams). We do that.*

Well who is this Didi?

*She’s my friend. We roll down the hill sometimes but not a lot.*

The father reported that the family home, and other houses in their small town, had suffered recent break-and-enter incidents. The family acquired two large, watchful dogs, but several months after the break-ins Kyleigh shared Didi’s additional role. Part of this interview conversation follows here:

Does Didi play inside your house too?

*Yeah, her, she comes in the house and plays dolls with me. And she sleeps too.*

What does Didi do when you sleep?

*She sleeps. Then she wakes me up.*

She wakes you up when you’re asleep?

*If something happened, if somebody came in my room, Didi wakes me up if something happens. Yeah, that’s what happens if somebody comes in*
my room. Didi wakes me up, and if me and Didi find out when something happens, that’s when Didi wakes me up.

It sounds like Didi takes care of you, and you take care of her too.

We do that. She sees it, and I do too, sometimes. When Didi finds out what that is, and me too, and I don’t know who’s that. Well, it just goes away. Didi does it.

In conversation, Kyleigh confirmed her mother’s report that Didi can be a cat, dog, or best friend. Kyleigh explained that Didi is my most best friend and that hers is a people friend what’s pretend. Several times during our interviews and conversations, Kyleigh defined her relationship with Didi as I’m her friend and she’s my friend. Kyleigh stressed that Didi did not have a family like Nile.

Our conversation was:

I’m wondering if Didi has a family?

No, hers doesn’t have a family. Her has friends.

Like you?

Yeah, I’m her friend.

Like Nile?

Yeah.

Kyleigh’s parents described their daughter as very intelligent, creative, but they are astonished at the level of detail that accompanies Kyleigh’s descriptions of Nile and Didi. The father explained that:
Her details, her attention to detail is amazing. I don’t know how she keeps it all straight, but she does. And she remembers it all too. And she corrects me if I don’t remember it quite right.

Kyleigh’s skill at creating imaginary companions and supporting details has been witnessed by others beyond the family context. The mother described one particularly upsetting incident concerning an earlier imaginary companion:

She (Kyleigh) makes up such believable stuff with all these details. The one night she sat out at the hostess stations and (the hostess) came back in tears and said, “Oh, I didn’t know Kyleigh’s friend died in a car crash. I had no idea. That’s so terrible.” And I told her that she didn’t. Kyleigh sat out there and told her this girl’s name and how old she was – she was three. She told her how long they’d been friends; that they’d met at daycare, and all about the accident. She told (the hostess) that the little girl had died, and (the hostess) was like, almost crying. I said that nobody had died in a car accident, and that I didn’t know what she was talking about. But (Kyleigh) had enough real like details that this sixteen-year-old girl thought that a little girl had really died in a car accident. And that was one of her pretend friends.

During the period of data collection sessions with child-participant #1, I often visited with both Tory and Kyleigh. One afternoon, we were sitting on the front steps of the inn, and Kyleigh told us a story about the deaths of several of her imaginary friends. The following report is directly from my observation notes:
Kyleigh told Tory and me about her five friends who got in an accident on the couch because (the father) was playing a dangerous video game, and three of them got hurt and didn’t live through it. She used such vivid details that it took me a minute to realize that she was talking about her pretend friends. She said that two of them made it out ok but can’t play in the living room anymore because it’s such a violent Star Wars game. I remember that she used the terms violent and terrible accident.

The mother expressed concern about Kyleigh’s use of sophisticated details in deaths of her imaginary companions. Our conversation follows:

That’s my only real fear about this kind of pretend play – that most of her really vivid imaginary friends seem to meet their demise in some awful way. It would make sense to work through stuff like that, just pretending.

During our first parent-participant interview, the parents reported that, even from a very young age, Kyleigh demonstrated and shared vivid details about her imaginary companions. The mother explained that as a toddler:

She had one when she was two. And then she had some more. She talked to them, and she talked about them. I was a little concerned that it might make her lie later, but (the father) wasn’t worried about it.

The parents were certain that their daughter easily navigated the pretense/reality boundary; they responded: Yeah, she can talk about what’s real. And if we ask her about something pretend, she looks at us like we’re the stupid
ones. When I asked if Kyleigh had ever blamed one of her imaginary companions for her own inappropriate words or actions, the mother reported:

*Oh yeah. She has at least once blamed Didi for messing up her closet. She broke something once, I can’t remember what it was anymore, but she blamed one of her friends. When the imaginary friend doesn’t actually pan out, because we say, “Your friend wasn’t really here, Kyleigh; that couldn’t have happened,” then she blames one of her brothers. Like, “It was (the brother).” But it’s the weekend and (the brother) is at his dad’s.*

Kyleigh maintains that Nile and Didi would never do stuff what’s bad. When I broached the subject of attaching blame to Nile or Didi, Kyleigh replied, *I can’t talk about thems things.* She finished eating her doughnut in silence.

Despite the parents’ expressed occasional concerns about death, details, and potential lies, both the mother and father agreed: *We know she’s a good story teller (and) she really makes up interesting characters.* A month before we began our data collection sessions, Kyleigh told me: *Aunt Suzie, I should be in your book, too. I know about friends what people can’t see.* When I shared Kyleigh’s words with her parents, the mother concluded: *That’s just too smart. I don’t know what we’ll do with her.*

Kyleigh identified her imaginary companions, Nile and Didi, as *people friends what’s pretend.* She easily named friends who were real people, such as her brothers and sister. During one of our initial sessions, Kyleigh and I were studying a photograph of her parents’ wedding. Kyleigh named her father and
mother as [first name] and Mom. She discussed her siblings, including her perspective of herself in the sibling hierarchy, as follows:

Who’s the girl in this photo, the girl with the long, pretty dress?

_Ooh, that’s my sister._

I don’t know her name.

_Whose name?_

That girl in the picture, the one who is your sister, what is her name?

_That’s [name], you know that._

Is she your big sister?

_No, I’m the little one. But not Jem; him’s the baby._

Who is Jem?

_I just told you him’s the baby around here._

Jem is the baby here? Is he your brother?

_No, Jem just a baby. Him’s not a brother yet._

Show me how big he is right now.

_Him growed and is this big (hands spread and rocking)._ 

So, how big will he be when he’s not a baby anymore?

_Like this big (hands above her head)._ 

So, let’s see. You have you, and (I name all the children).

_Wait, wait. I put them on my fingers like this. (named and touched finger for each)._
The parents and Kyleigh agree that she spends a significant amount of time in solitary play, but, by Kyleigh’s description, her solitary play is partially balanced with sibling play. For instance, Kyleigh’s sister will play dolls with Kyleigh; this includes imaginative play with Kyleigh’s personified family of walnuts. Kyleigh’s older brothers attended segments of our data collection sessions during which they talked about playing hide and seek with Kyleigh and numerous cousins at their Pap’s cabin. The brothers also report that they enjoy reading stories to Kyleigh and pretending to be the story characters, especially if the characters are scary. When home from their busy organized sports activities, the father and older children enjoy playing video and digital games and watching occasional movies; during these activities, Kyleigh usually chooses independent doll play in close physical proximity to her siblings.

Beyond the siblings in her immediate family, Kyleigh often plays with her cousin Tory and children at the inn where her parents work. Our conversation about real people friends follows:

You have brothers and a sister to play with you. Who else do you play with? Do you play with any kids at the restaurant?

_Tory, I play with Tory. But not all kids. Sometimes kids just eat and thems don’t play._

What kinds of things do Tory and you like to play?

_Like coloring books. And ponies; we play ponies. Hers has ponies at the restaurant sometimes. And princess, too. But mostly at hers house, not_
the restaurant. But we play with the dogs outside. And the water, but if it’s hot, not cold.

Oh, I see. If it’s hot outside, you can play in the water.

Yeah, hers mom says it’s ok.

Do you have any other friends you play with? Nah-uh.

Do you have other cousins that you play with? Yeah, lots of thems. At Pap’s and Mimi’s I play with them. They play with us.

Kyleigh described rough and tumble play, like wrestling and dead tag, that she enjoys with her older cousins. Hide and seek is a popular game at her grandparents’ cabin. Often the aunts and uncles join the children for hide and seek, but the game continues to be directed by the children. Pap and Mimi’s cabin was mentioned by Kyleigh several times during our interview and conversation sessions. When I asked her about storytelling and listening to stories, Kyleigh shared that her pap has the best stories that scare us really, really so bad, but we just go to bed and nobody is crying. We don’t cry for real.

I transitioned our conversation from real friends to pretend friends by asking Kyleigh:

You know, sometimes kids play with real friends, like Tory, and sometimes they play with pretend friends that they make up. Do you ever play with pretend friends that you make up?
Do you know about some other friends?

I think I might, but I’m wondering what you can tell me. Do you have any friends that you make up or pretend about?

Like these? (runs to get small bowl with about 10 multi-size walnuts, some wrapped in pieces of paper towel with cotton balls).

Oh, tell me about these.

Them is a family. Here’s the mom, and the dad. Here’s the other dad.

Thems is all the little kids.

How do you play with this family, Kyleigh?

Them talk to me. I rock the babies, like this, see? (rocking) And they need to be warm, see? (wrapping a walnut in a cotton ball). Because they are too little.

Too little to take care of themselves?

Yeah, thems is the babies. Sometimes they sleep in bed with (my sister) ’cause she can babysit.

Do they ever go anywhere with you?

Uh-huh. They go to my other mimi’s what you don’t know. Her is kinda the restaurant mimi.

Your other mimi? That’s right, I don’t know her. So, you take the little family to her house?

Sometimes, like maybe one. Them very, very tiny.
During the initial Parent-Participant Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview, the mother explained Kyleigh’s little walnut family. She reported:

*Like she has this little collection of black walnuts all dressed up and wrapped in towels and tissues in a bowl, and they are her babies. They have names, and she treats them like people and talks with them a lot. She takes care of them. The other night, she asked if her babies could sleep in our bed so she could sleep with (her sister). I said, “Sure, just leave them right there.” One day, she asked (the grandmother) to babysit her babies because she was going back to work. She said she had to go back to work, so (the grandmother) babysat, and Kyleigh went back to work.*

Kyleigh’s play with the walnut family began during the autumn of the previous year and was continuing at the time of our sessions nearly ten months later. Just as she acted with caretaking behaviors, rocking and cooing, toward her walnut babies, Kyleigh extended similar nurturing actions during the following conversation:

*I think you would like the tiny birds in our barn. They were eggs in a nest in the spring, and then they broke the shells and came out. I watched their mom and dad feed them.*

*Cause them were so very tiny, tiny, right?*

That’s right. And then they got bigger and bigger. They ate and grew bigger.*
*My babies do that.*

Babies do that. They grew and learned to fly. Then, they flew out of the nest, and the whole bird family flew away to another place. I can still see the old nest where they used to live.

*Did you get a bird family to stay at the old place?*

Not yet.

*Here. (handing a walnut baby wrapped in paper towel) You can have this baby to keep at your barn. Or maybe, you, you can take it in your house to live at hers bedroom. It very, very tiny, so rock and rock this baby, ok?*

I will rock it, yes. Thank you very much.

I keep Kyleigh’s walnut baby in my desk drawer; it is snugly wrapper in the paper towel and tucked in a handkerchief. Kyleigh has visited my home twice since our study, and each time she asked to see her walnut baby. She carefully rocked and kissed the baby, and then she gently placed it back in the desk drawer.

Nurturing and caretaking are evident in Kyleigh’s play with dolls. When I inquired about favorite toys, Kyleigh said:

*I don’t know. I probably play with my dolls, mostly my dollies. They’re babies, you know. I have to take care of my babies. They very, very little. You have to cook for them. You have to feed them.*

Kyleigh’s play with dolls is very realistic with evidence of caretaking behaviors, but she offered a clear statement concerning the pretense/ reality distinction
when she concluded the above conversation by telling me: *But that’s the real kitchen (pointing toward the family kitchen at the rear of the house).* As evidenced in Kyleigh’s pretend doll play, her preference for pretense extends to movie choices too; our conversation follows:

Do you like to watch movies?

*I don’t have too many. But some, I have some. Not Little Mermaid.*

Did you see *Brave*?

*Yeah, uh-huh, I saw that one, Brave.*

What did you think?

*It was pretty awesome. Because, I like the fighting with the swords and stuff like that.*

What did you think about the bear part, when the mom turned into a bear?

*That was terrible. It was a scary part. It was a surprise!*

Yes, I was surprised too. Are there other movies that you like to watch?

*All of them (laughing).*

Kyleigh concluded our conversation about pretense with a delightful, creative response. Our final component of the Child-Participant Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview is as follows:

Where did that other doughnut go? Did it go into your belly?

*And now it’s gone forever. I ate it gone, gone with my big, sharp teeth.*

*Like a bear (growling).*
Narrative Production Tasks #1-5

Narrative Production Task #1: Story Listening and Retelling:

*Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1968)

For Kyleigh’s narrative production task #1, story listening and retelling, she chose *Rosie’s Walk* from the collection of picturebooks I had assembled. A developmentally appropriate picturebook, *Rosie’s Walk* is written and illustrated by Pat Hutchins (1968). Recommended for ages 3-6, I considered *Rosie’s Walk* developmentally appropriate and inviting for young children. As analysis of the story text, I identify *Rosie’s Walk* as a clever duality of words and pictures. The text itself focuses on the seemingly simple story of Rosie the hen ambling away from her chicken coup for a quiet, uneventful walk. The illustrations show the story of a fox in constant, sly pursuit of Rosie the hen. Rosie walks ahead unaware of the potential attacker, while the fox encounters disaster after disaster. The fox is finally chased away by a swarm of angry bees, and Rosie’s walk leads her right back to the chicken coup, unaware and unharmed. Thirty-two simple, predictable words, including *over, under, around,* and *through,* lead Rosie the hen and her readers along a farmyard walk. *Rosie’s Walk* blends comical antics with potential disaster and offers a reassuring conclusion.

Hutchins’ fourteen graphic pictures of the sneaky, predatory fox tell another story of Rosie’s walk. In analysis of the illustrations in *Rosie’s Walk,* I believe that by utilizing bold, mobile lines as details, Hutchins conveys the experience of Rosie’s walking and the fox’s stalking. Vivid colors of yellow and
red carry the reader’s eye in a sweeping left to right progression; I believe a child’s re-focus on the fox is also driven by the color play. Pictures which bleed and do not contain blue propel the narrative forward and create tension. Perhaps the lack of typical blue background and the juxtaposition of foreground against stark white represent tension inside enclosed space. After all, we expect the great outdoors to offer expansive freedoms, not tension. Doonan writes about the contradiction or deviation that pictures may cause in “... feeling from what the words imply,” (1993, p.18). Certainly, this is the case with *Rosie’s Walk*, as Rosie proceeds blissfully unaware of the foxy tragedy waiting to befall her. I hoped that Rosie’s unwitting, continual interruptions and eventual compromise of the fox’s goal would invite Kyleigh to enter the minds and motivations of the characters.

I introduced *Rosie’s Walk* orally to the Kyleigh. I invited her to comment during reading but kept my researcher comments non-committal. Kyleigh nodded, became very still, and gently put her hands over mine. I read the story, and Kyleigh helped me turn the pages. As the story progressed, Kyleigh became animated; she shook her finger at the fox, and warned Rosie to *get away!* Kyleigh began her retelling of the story by patting the cover and title page, and then she folded my hands over the first page of the story and pointed to the illustration on the facing page. With each turn of the initial pages, Kyleigh placed my hand as an anchor and used her own hands to point and emphasize actions like jumping and walking. Her voice varied in pitch and intensity according to
character. Kyleigh adopted a moderate, calm voice for Rosie and a gravelly voice for the fox. She buzzed for the bees and made squelching sounds when saying the word *mud*. She shouted at the fox, *Don’t you eat my friend, no, no!* Kyleigh’s final sentence was spoken with definite satisfaction; she celebrated Rosie’s safe return.

Following the conclusion, I asked Kyleigh to retell the story beginning with the front cover. As the researcher, I planned to offer two prompts per page if necessary; those prompts were non-specific such as “Oh, dear” or “And then what?” My researcher prompts avoided any elaborations of the specific text. Kyleigh continued the retelling on the targeted page following my second researcher prompt, and I turned to the next picturebook page and allow her to continue with the retelling. Kyleigh’s full retelling is as follows:

**Narrative Production Task #1: Story Listening and Retelling:**

*Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1968)

*Rosie takes a walk*

*And they’re at the farm. See?*

*Her is taking a walk.*

*A chicken, she is a chicken.*

*See him? Him wants to eat her.*

*Him jumping to her.*

*Jump, jump, and him, him, he hit this.*
This one eats this, and this one doesn’t eat yet.

Then cross this and gonna try and eat him, her.

Then cross this pond and gonna fall right in.

He’s crossing here and jumping and but still no eating the chicken.

Him fall into mud and water, mud and mud.

He going across this mud and gonna try and eat this chicken.

Not the frogs, not the goat, bleh.

Him fall into mud and water, mud and mud.

He going across this mud and gonna try and eat this chicken.

Then him, that fox, jumping up over the hay to eat that chicken.

But not yet, him doesn’t.

The mouses are there and trying to go through this, and through this, and up and up.

They go away.

But the fox cannot eat that chicken!

That fox, him sees by the little house to eat that chicken.

But not now, not now.

But, ouch, the bag of seeds falls on him’s head.

No eating that chicken. Not him either.

Him is going through the fence, but too fat.

He just jumping over the fence.

Now they go down here through the hill. See?
And then over the fence and him "bang" to the little wagon.

Oh, no – uh – oh! He jumping and jumping to get there.

The chicken, she just walking under the little houses with bees in them.

Him goes into the bees and their houses.

Them so mad at him.

Chase and chase him way over the hill to far away.

So him can’t eat the chicken.

Bad fox.

Them bees is her friends.

They say, "Don’t you eat my friend, no, no" to the fox.

They’re friends.

She goes back to her little house.

She did not get eated up.

Narrative Production Task #2: Script Production

I chose a recurrent activity with which the Kyleigh had a high degree of familiarity, such as preparing food, helping with her baby brother, and caring for her pets. I offered a prompt based on her indications in conversation, such as “Do you ever make your own breakfast? Tell me everything about making cereal for breakfast.”

I conducted three more script narrative production samples. Additional script narrative prompts included giving directions for packing a diaper bag and feeding
a pet. My researcher choices of script narrative task productions were highly flexible and directly dependent upon Kyleigh’s experiences that she referenced in conversation. I also followed topics of interest provided by her mother in conversation.

Script #1

_Sometimes, I make cereal._

_Put it in a bowl, and put milk in it._

_Then get the spoon and put it in._

_And eat it. And have some more._

Script #2

_I do that._

_Put diapers in it and clothes in it._

_Put wipies in it._

_Then you put juice or milk maybe._

_Then get your baby and go shopping._

_Then if him poop, then you hafta go bathroom and change him._

_That’s all._

_I know about it._

_Yes, I do._

Script #3

_I like dogs._

_You get it food and put it in a bowl, the food you do._
Then you get water in the bowl, another bowl.

Then the dog drinks it and eats it.

**Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narratives**

(PENS #1-3)

The parents identified recent events with which Kyleigh was familiar. In particular, the father indicated that Kyleigh enjoyed several family outings including: going to Pap and Mimi’s (maternal grandparents) for vacation; spending the day picnicking and swimming with Gram (paternal grandmother); and shopping for the start of the new school year. Therefore, as a prompt, I offered: Your mom told me you spent the whole weekend at Pap and Mimi’s cabin. Tell me all about your visit. I conducted two more personal event narrative production samples using prompts based upon the vacation as a topic. These prompts included: I’ve never stayed in a bedroom with ten other cousins. Please tell me everything about staying together with all your cousins; and tell me all about your favorite thing at Pap and Mimi’s cabin. By using Kyleigh’s retelling of her experiences, I wove in targeted questions as specific prompts for storytelling. This strategy oriented Kyleigh to produce personal event narratives that represented her experiences and abilities.

**PEN #1**

*We went there, to Pap and Mimi’s.*

*We played outside a lot.*

*But first, we had to ride there, so far away.*
Then, we got there, and we had dogs there.

Everybody brought their dogs.

And bean bags to sit on.

We slepted in sleeping bags or in the beds.

Me and Tory and [sister] in our bed.

They have lots of beds.

And [cousin], I think.

Like this many slepted in our bed.

Jem was in the crib, because he’s a baby.

**PEN #2**

Yeah, we hiked and walked.

Well, it’s very far and a long way to go.

You go by the water.

We saw big fish that [aunt and uncle] were catching.

The fish was, like this long.

A frog was at the water too.

The frog, him was like that big.

The dog runned and runned for the frog.

Him jump away, jump away.

I couldn’t catch him too.

It sinked.

There was mud, yuck.
Like swish.

Then it was gone.

PEN #3

We cooked pancakes at breakfast.

Mm, I was – eat everything good.

Like pancakes with blueberries, and syrup, and sometimes chocolate chips.

Wait, no chocolate chips.

And bacon and eggs.

I don’t like it runny too much – yuck.

I chewed the food with my teeth.

There’s first teeth and second teeth.

Tory has some teeth out.

She will get some new teeth.

But, but, I don’t have any of them teeth.

That’s all.

Narrative Production Task #4a:

Storytelling with Researcher Prompt

I planned to offer a storytelling prompt to the child-participant, such as

Tell me a story about a pony with wings. However, Kyleigh was excited to talk with me following a weekend visit at her Pap and Mimi’s farm, so I presented her with conversation-based choices for storytelling instead of simple prompts. We
focused on country and farm ideas, and I drew prompts from Kyleigh’s personal experience base. I asked Kyleigh to tell me a story about Pap’s nice cow with wings.

*OK, Pap has a nice cow with wings.*

*We drive and fly on him.*

*We fly to Florida like Tory went there.*

*He would drop me off.*

*He drop me off, but it’s a long ride to fly there.*

*I would have to take off my helmet and shake up my head, because it takes a long time to get there.*

*We would fly, all of us – all of us in the seats.*

*Pap, Mimi, my mom and all of us.*

*Even the kids could ride on it, and they would be safe.*

*You went on it too.*

*Well, I would go there, and, and I could fly on a cow to get there.*

*With helmets, we could fly with helmets on.*

**Narrative Production Task #4b: Story Telling without Researcher Prompt**

I provided the opportunity for the Kyleigh to create a story with a self-prompt and her choice of props. She chose my family of little dolls and furniture. Our preamble conversation follows:
So, I brought these little people dolls. I thought maybe you could tell me a story about these people.

*Are these from you house where you live?*

Yep, they are from my house. I have a big dollhouse, and they live inside it.

*You should bring your dollhouse.*

It’s pretty big. You might have to go see it instead of me bringing it to you.

*Ohh, ooh. And these people live there?*

They do. What’s this?

*That’s a bed. You know.*

I bet you could tell me a story about it. Her narrative continues here:

*Ok. See these little girls?*

*They belong to this dad and this mom.*

*Here’s the other dad.*

*Him lives over there.*

*These little kids, and this big sister go bed now.*

*Goodnight, kiss, kiss.*

*Night, sleep tight.*

*Then, “boom, boom” - a big storm.*

*They so scared, waa, waa.*

*The dad, him watching TV.*
She, the mom, see - hers comes over.

“It’s ok honey. Go back to sleep.”

And then, them do.

Just sleeping now.

Narrative Production Task #5:

Story Listening and Extension

Narrative Production Task #5 Story Listening and Extension is my own design, and so the selection of a developmentally appropriate picturebook was a priority. With its high pretense quality and moody indeterminism, *Come Away from the Water*, Shirley (Burningham, 1977) was a right fit for Tory, child-participant #1. Although *Come Away from the Water*, Shirley is recommended for the 3-7 years of age group, of which Kyleigh is a member, I believed that it was important to be more than age appropriate. For me, making developmentally appropriate choices means recognizing the individual child’s experiences and growth and then aligning approaches, strategies, and resources accordingly. Kyleigh is attuned to maternal nurturing, and she cares for others in this manner. She is insightful concerning the internal states of people and characters, but she demonstrates unease when talking about her personal night fears. Perhaps this is one reason why she created her imaginary companion, Didi. It is Didi who watches over Kyleigh as she sleeps at night. With these thoughts in mind, I searched for a picturebook that offered a nurturing maternal character, fanciful pretense, and a non-threatening mood. *Sophie’s Masterpiece,*
written by Eileen Spinelli and illustrated by Jane Dyer, (2001) was a perfect choice.

*Sophie’s Masterpiece*, recommended for children 4-7 years of age, tells the story of Sophie the artistic spider. From a tender spider age, Sophie has demonstrated that she’s “no ordinary house spider.” Sophie is a talented artist who spins webs of amazing original design. Sophie leaves her home and youth to discover her place in the world. At Beekman's Boardinghouse, a neglected rooming house, Sophie lavishes her artistic efforts. Unfortunately, neither Sophie’s lovely parlor curtains nor snappy new suit are appreciated by the landlady or the sea captain. Sophie’s kindness is met with horror and rejection at every turn. Finally, Sophie laboriously climbs the stairs to the shabby room of an impoverished young pregnant woman. Sophie sees that the young woman is unable to prepare for her coming baby. Despite her advancing age and diminished eyesight, Sophie weaves an ethereal blanket, her final masterpiece. Her final gift is embraced and appreciated.

Illustrator Jane Dyer renders dreamy watercolor representations of Sophie’s webs with delicate lace, bright stars, cheerful flowers, and geometric shapes. Sophie is shown in the continuum of aging; she transitions from fresh faced youth to bohemian young adult and finally to elderly arachnid woman. I believe that the evolution of Sophie urges the young reader to turn the page as Sophie’s blond hair grows gray; her straight, riotous stocking-clad legs bow, and she adopts a cane. With fine strokes and ethereal luminosity of light and shade,
Dyer crafts Sophie’s magnum opus with rays of moonlight, the scent of pine, and captured snowflakes that transcend the elusive moment of disappearance. Only in a magical picturebook like Sophie’s Masterpiece could snowflakes and lullabies be threaded into the weave of a newborn baby’s blanket.

Narrative Production Task #5 is my original design, so I was very interested in Kyleigh’s resulting narrative. Because of the exploratory nature of this task, and to ensure transparency, I present the experience in its entirety here. I introduced the Story Listening and Extension to Kyleigh as:

If this story kept going, what do you think would happen? Tell me the story that comes after this.

Kyleigh was very animated and quickly took the book from my hands. Thumbing through the pages of the story, she pointed to several illustrations of Sophie and said:

*Her not ugly and disgusting.*

*Her not.*

*See her legs?*

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.*

*No, there’s eight.*

*See thems?*

*So, see this mommy and this baby?*

*Her got her hand on the baby, cause he’s so tiny.*

*Yeah, him’s new.*
I want that baby.

Well, really, the mommy pat the baby.

She goes pat, pat.

Then the spider crawled up the baby’ back.

Then her goes down the baby’s neck.

And the baby say, “Waa, waa!”

He really crying a little right now.

The mommy hit the spider down.

The spider gets hit down the baby’s leg.

It’s running away.

It has to get away.

The mommy will not see it.

That’s what.

The spider is hiding now.

Sophie is hiding now.

Artistic and Dramatic Productions

Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks

All artistic and dramatic production tasks took place during related interview components and discussion. Kyleigh’s artistic and dramatic productions were embedded in our interview sessions and discussions. It is appropriate that her productions be approached as a cumulative set; therefore all transcripts are included here in their entirety.
Artistic Expression Production Task #1

Baby Birds but not Didi

So, could you draw a picture of your bird family?

_No, only [sister[ and I color. Or Tory and me. It’s together.

Maybe we could draw and color together. Would that be ok for you?

_Yes, and we could make the baby birds. Them’s really, really little.

Uh - huh. You start.

(Kyleigh draws.)

_Now, the nest goes there. You make it there with the mommy but not the babies.

Oh, not the babies?

_No, not, because they can fly now. No, no, put the nest on top of the tree stick. The branch is under it. See? (demonstrates by drawing a blue "stick")

Like this?

_Yes. And, and put a heart here and two frownie faces.

Frownie faces? Why are they frowning?

_Them’s so sad. Didi is not here today. Her’s is not in this coloring.

Did I meet Didi yet?

_No, I just telled you; she isn’t here today.

Can she come next time?
Ok, but see her’s is hiding here behind the big nest what I drewed. You can’t see her.

But you can see her?

*Uh - huh. And her’s will come next time.*

![Figure 5: Baby Birds but not Didi](image)

**Artistic Expression Production Task #2**

**Nile, Didi, and Emily**

Kyleigh invited me into her imaginative play world, and she shared important details about her imaginary companions Nile and Didi. Following our second interview, I introduced the artistic production task in a manner similar to the previous week’s task:
I really enjoyed hearing you tell about Nile and Didi. Could you draw a picture of them for me?

*I can. You can draw it with me too, like together.*

You mean like the drawing together we did last time?

*Yeah, like [sister] and me do it.*

Like the prior week’s artistic production task, Kyleigh directed the activity toward a collective effort, and I responded:

That sounds fun. You go first this time.

*So, sun and clouds and these are the rain. Done. Mine’s turn is done.*

Ok, you pick what I should draw next.

*Mm, a flower with pink. That’s good. Wait, I put the little green wiggle things on it.*

Ok, your turn. I’m wondering if you’ll put Nile and Didi in.

*So, this is Nile. Him’s shirt is green. This crayon shakes. Now, you make something.*

You tell me what.

*Make Emily, Tory’s butterfly girl.*

How should I draw her? Have you seen her?

*Nope, but Tory telled me she has sparkly wing and everything to fly.*

Ok, here she is with sparkling wings.

*Now, see her green shirt? I drawed it like Nile.*

Oh wow. Can Emily see that it’s like Nile’s?
Yes, actually she can see his shirt, but not seeing him looking, too.

How’s that?

*Him’s eyes are not here. See?*

Oh, yes, I see that now. What about Didi?

*I made her right, right here. Emily is flying up to her. Didi, her’s flying very high too.*

Oh, Didi can fly?

*That’s why she can be so way up in the sky.*

Figure 6: Nile, Didi, and Emily
Artistic Expression Production Task #3

The Place for Singing

Kyleigh and I had been sitting on the front steps and singing Three Blind Mice and tossing pebbles in the puddles. It had been raining, and the temperature was dropping, so my hands were chilled and stiff. Kyleigh seemed impervious to the chilly air, but she noticed I was rubbing my hands. When we retreated to the porch to draw, she quietly took the crayons from my hand and began the drawing activity independently. Our conversation follows and is focused on Didi:

Your front walk is a good place for singing.

My friends and me go there a lot. Didi does.

Oh, Didi goes there? Could you draw that for me?

Ok, here is the place for singing. Here is Didi.

Oh, tell me a little more so I remember.

Well, this is her head. And, and the rest of her has a towel. She’s under a big, big towel to be warmer. She got wet.

We got a little wet too, didn’t we? When we were singing, we got a little wet from the rain.

But Didi got wet in the bathtub. Her’s doesn’t sing outside yet.
Figure 7: The Place for Singing

**Artistic Expression Production Task #4**

**My People Eat Pancakes at Pap’s**

During Kyleigh’s third personal event narrative, she happily related the pancake making at Pap and Mimi’s cabin. At the close of her narrative production, she jumped out of her chair and rummaged in my bag for the crayons and paper. Kyleigh initiated the process, included her imaginary companions, and completed her artistic production independently. Our full transcript follows:

*Let’s draw now.*

That’s a great idea. What are you thinking about drawing?
I, I’m gonna color a picture of all of us making pancakes.

Ok. You draw and then tell me all about it.

Look here. This is Pap making pancakes. And we are all eating them up with syrup and chocolate chips (slurping noises).

Yum. So, please tell me who everybody is.

Here is Mom and Jem, Pap, I told you. And this is [Tory’s mother]. Gram is right here. I sit by Gram. And right here is Nile. And them’s is all my babies, you know, my baby birds.

What are the baby birds doing?

Well, they are eating pancakes. And Nile is having no pancakes.

Nile is having no pancakes?

No, he like yogurt.
Dramatic Expression Production Task #1

Texting Nile

Kyleigh described texting with Nile, and she demonstrated the play activity at my request: Could you text Nile right now?

Sure (texts on play phone).

What did you text?

It is Come over right now to play. Oh, wait. There’s a text from Nile. Oh, oh. He cannot come, because, cause him’s mom, his mom – she wrecked the van. She did that last week too.
Wow, a wreck. Is everyone all right?

Yeah, she does it all the time. He should just drive his-self. Maybe tomorrow.

**Dramatic Expression Production Task #2**

**Baby Birds**

During the course of our study sessions, Kyleigh began preschool at the local Head Start center. Following her second day of preschool, she cried while telling me about her day. We had a brief conversation about being away from our families. In Kyleigh’s case, she had to leave home and be separated from her parents and siblings while at school. I explained my own experience of missing my adult children who are grown up and live independently. Our conversation was very transparent, and Kyleigh requested that it not be included in *our book about stories*. I agreed, and we decided to play with her baby birds. Kyleigh’s tender dramatic expression follows:

*My baby birds had to come today. Here, you can hold them, not so tight.*

Tell me about them.

*(counts) One, two, three, four, five, six. Only six baby birds.*

You said only six.

*Some goes to school today. These babies are sad. We can hold them.*

*Here, here is the blankie. Don’t cry baby. We got you.*
Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter 5 presents the full case study of Kyleigh and her imaginary companions, Nile and Didi. As with Chapter 4, the purpose of Chapter 5 is to offer the exploratory case study as it unfolded. Interviews, observations, narrative task productions, and artistic and dramatic productions are included. Data drawn from interviews and observations tell a rich, compelling story about Kyleigh, her life, and play with Nile and Didi. All Kyleigh’s narrative task productions are included as full transcripts. A collection of Kyleigh’s artistic and dramatic productions completes the Chapter 4 presentation of the case study of Kyleigh, Nile, and Didi. Deep analysis of narrative and assessment of narrative is conducted later in Chapter 6 within the framework of answering the research questions, but the aim here is to allow the reader to construct a personal understanding of Kyleigh through her own words.
Chapter Six

Analysis of the Results and

Answering the Research Questions of the

Study

Introduction

Chapter 6 presents the results of the two case studies introduced in chapters 4 and 5 and offers deep analysis in response to the research questions that form the basis of this study. Chapter 4 offered the case study of child-participant #1, Tory, and her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly. Chapter 5 presented the case study of child-participant #2, Kyleigh, and her imaginary companions, Nile and Didi. Parent-participants were included in each case study.

This multiple case study was exploratory in nature. To best tell the stories of the child-participants, I adopted a creative narrative writing stance. It is highly appropriate for a study that utilizes analysis of narrative and assessment of narratives to be written with my creative narrative stance. The lives, experiences, and words of the child-participants and parent-participants were shared with the reader in the mode of a story. Data from interviews, observations, narrative task productions, and artistic and dramatic task productions were triangulated and merged into the central story of each child-participant. The narrative task
productions of each child-participant were transcribed from recordings to text and recognized as documents; these narrative task productions underwent rigorous researcher assessment of narrative evaluation. Each child-participant’s central story, their narrative task productions, and my assessment of their narrative task productions were considered as a unified data collection. The data collection and data analysis processes were strengthened by researcher reflexivity. Thus, chapters 4 and 5 present an honest, transparent story of the child-participants.

During this study, the child-participants’ stories revealed rich, beautiful, heartfelt, and unexpected information. The research questions were addressed with compelling and complex details; the child-participants’ stories both aligned with the research questions and challenged them. In this chapter, I respond to the research questions as I share the results of the study and offer my deep analysis of the unique stories of Tory and Kyleigh. To most effectively answer the research questions, conduct deep analysis, and avoid undue repetition, the chapter discussion is contextualized within the research questions of the study. The three parts of chapter 6 include:

Part 1:

- What is imaginary companion play?
- What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?

Part 2:

- What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills?
Part 3:

- What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children?

Part 1

**What is Imaginary Companion Play? What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?**

**Interviews, Observations, Artistic, and Dramatic Production;**

**Results; Terms**

Imaginary companion play with pretend friends is a historically recognized phenomenon of childhood and represents what is often considered to be the most creative act of the imagination (Klausen & Passman, 2007) – making someone out of nothing (Partington & Grant, 1984). Traditionally, the pretend someone is referred to as an *imaginary companion* (Svendsen, 1934; Singer & Singer, 1990), but the term *imaginary playmate* is common in early literature (Hurlock & Burnstein, 1932; Kirkpatrick, 1929; Vostrovsky, 1890). In documents, discussions with parent-participants, and references throughout my study, I utilized the term *imaginary companion*. Parents used the terms: *imaginary companion, pretend friend, imaginary friend, invisible friend, and friend*; Kyleigh’s father used the term *people who aren’t really there*. When talking with the child-participants, I used the term *pretend friend*, as it seemed more
appropriate for young children. Child-participant #1, Tory, used the terms *pretend friend, my friend,* and *best friend.* Kyleigh, child-participant #2, referred to her imaginary companions with terms including: *friend, my friend, friends what people can’t see,* and *some other friends.* Parent-participants and child-participants consistently included the distinction *friend* in their terms for imaginary companion. I believe that the study participants’ consistent use of the word *friend* is an indication of both accuracy in term and configuring role of the imaginary companion; this also lends credibility to my belief that friendship is a defining feature of imaginary companion play.

Specific operational terms for types of imaginary companions reflect the mode of transformation in pretense and pretend play. Harris (2000) distinguished between three modes of pretend play according to the supposed vehicle of pretense: a *personified object* is directed toward an external object; a *pretend identity* is directed toward the child himself; an *imaginary companion* is a product of the imagination and lacks an objective basis (see also Klausen & Passman, 2007). Tory’s pretend other, Emily the Butterfly, is an imaginary companion. Tory’s mother reported that her daughter has consistently created imaginary companions since age two. Kyleigh’s imaginative play creations take several forms. Her family of walnuts, which her parents reported as a six-month endeavor, is a classic example of personified object(s). Kyleigh’s *friends what people can’t see* are imaginary companions, Nile and Didi. Neither female child-participant created a pretend identity, which is consistent with research literature
on gender differences and imaginary companion play. Typically, boys are more likely to create pretend identities (Carlson & Taylor, 2005). In general, contemporary researchers recognize and employ the term *imaginary companion* as most appropriate and operational (Fernyhough, 2007; Roby & Kidd, 2008; Taylor & Mottweiller, 2008; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). The various terms used by child-participants and parent-participants in my study can be classified within the category of *imaginary companions*.

**Definitions**

The definition of imaginary companion play has evolved from simply play with an invisible other (Svendsen, 1934) to include play with personified objects (Singer & Singer, 1981, 1990) and impersonation (Taylor, 1999). The accepted contemporary definition of imaginary companion play, and the definition upon which my study was based, identifies repeated play with an invisible other which may include an invisible character, personified objects such as toys and stuffed animals, or impersonation. As the parent-participants shared their observations, conversations, and episodes of imaginary companion play in which their daughters participated, they used words like *vivid, on-going, intense,* and *dedicated.* Tory and Kyleigh created complex details of their imaginary companions’ lives, and they sustained long-term relationships lasting six months or longer with their imaginary companions. Both sets of parent-participants were astonished by the aura of reality that marked their children’s imaginary companion play. Kyleigh offered a simple explanation that could be considered as
a definition of imaginary companion play when she said *I know about friends what people can’t see.*

As I listened to the child and parents participants’ descriptions, re-read transcripts, and checked my journal notes, I found striking similarities between the parents’ accounts and a definition by Bouldin and Pratt (1999) who define an imaginary companion as: “a very vivid imaginary character that does not actually exist but is treated as real by the child, who plays with it and refers to it in conversation throughout the day” (p. 400).

Despite the recent popularity of imaginary companion play study, a specific operational definition is not explicitly followed by researchers. Klausen & Passman (2005) have noted that the shifting parameters concerning the inclusion of personified objects have produced confusing results which complicate comparing studies. Data from my study confirm the diversity of definitions used in describing imaginary companion play and the need for additional clarification.

**Age and Gender**

Most researchers identify the traditional period of imaginary companion play as occurring from two and a half to five or six years of age (Bates, 1946; Hoff, 2005; Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 1999), and children as young as two and three can create imaginary companions (Kirkpatrick, 1929; Svendsen, 1934; Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 1999). According to the parent-participants, Tory and Kyleigh both exhibited observable imaginary companion play behaviors at 2
years. At the time of the study, the child-participants were aged 5 and 4 years and involved in continuing, complex play with their imaginary companions.

The traditional view of early childhood imaginary companion play recognized that children enter school and subsequently lose their imaginary companions (Newson & Newson, 1976). However, several studies disclose that children aged six and seven (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004) and as old as ten or eleven participate in imaginary companion play (Bates, 1946; Hurlock & Burstein, 1932). When Tory began our data collection sessions, she was in the ninth month of a preschool Head Start program and attended classes three mornings per week. Tory’s play with Emily the Butterfly did not decrease during her school enrollment. In fact, Tory’s play with Emily the Butterfly could be interpreted as increasing with school exposure as Emily’s newborn baby butterfly sister, Sparkle, joined Tory’s school bus rides and play at home as well. When Kyleigh and I began our third month of data collection sessions, she entered a preschool Head Start program. She clearly articulated her stress and separation anxiety to me, and her play with the walnut family was intense during that episode. When we completed our sessions in October, Kyleigh had been in preschool for seven weeks, and her play with imaginary companions Nile and Didi continued. It is possible that Tory and Kyleigh may continue their imaginary companion play well into primary and middle school as recent studies have indicated that imaginary companion play is reported well into

The type of imaginary companion created by children is correlated with the gender of the child. Usually, children create imaginary companions who are close to the same age and of the same sex as themselves. While girls create imaginary companions who are separate entities and function as friends or dependents, boys are more likely to impersonate imaginary characters rather than viewing their imaginary companions as separate others (Carlson, 2005; Taylor, 1999). Tory described Emily the Butterfly as *She’s very tall; the same much as me. And a girl butterfly.* Emily functioned as a friend, while baby Sparkle took on the role of a dependent. Tory described her caretaking behaviors like *holding* and *snuggling* Sparkle because she was *tiny*.

Kyleigh engages in caretaking behaviors with her personified family of walnuts. She said: *I rock the babies, like this, see? (rocking)* *And they need to be warm, see? (wrapping a walnut in a cotton ball). Because they are too little.* Kyleigh gave a walnut baby to me to fill my empty bird nest at home, and she shared specific directions for its care: *It very, very tiny, so rock and rock this baby, ok?* Different than her imaginary companion play with the personified family of walnuts, Kyleigh created imaginary companions Nile and Didi as friends similar in age or older than herself and engages in types of play specific to the imaginary companion. In play with Nile, Kyleigh sometimes assumes a joint cohort approach with activities such as texting; Nile also survives fantastic
incidents like motor vehicle accidents and incarceration. With Didi, Kyleigh reads books, tells stories, rolls down the hill, and plays dollies; these are activities specific to Didi and are not shared with Nile. Kyleigh’s relationship with Didi is markedly different than her relationship with Nile. Nile sleeps at his own house with his family, but Didi, who has no family, sleeps with Kyleigh. Nile seems to be a stuntman, and Kyleigh is a spectator. Didi functions as a caretaker and protector, and Kyleigh is her dependent. Certainly both Nile and Didi are separate, invisible others that function as friends, but Kyleigh’s blurring of the dependent role raises questions about the functions of imaginary companions created by girls (Carlson, 2005; Taylor, 1999).

**Family Structure and the Appearance of the Imaginary Companion**

Research reports that first-born and only children (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Manosevitz, Prentice, & Wilson, 1973) and children with moderately to widely spaced siblings are likely to create imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999). The child-participant case study population in my study aligns with established research, as Tory is an only child, and Kyleigh is the fourth-born is a family of five moderately spaced siblings. There is a five-year gap between Kyleigh and her next older sibling, a brother. The three older siblings are from the mother’s previous marriage. Later, the mother married Kyleigh’s father, and Kyleigh is the first child of this second family. Therefore, while Kyleigh is part of
a collection of moderately spaced siblings, she is also the first-born of the second set of children.

Children in particular family contexts may create imaginary companions as a way to fill a need for companionship, and perhaps Tory and Kyleigh create imaginary companions for this reason. However, no parent-participant reported concern that their child’s creation of an imaginary companion was an indication of loneliness, as is usually reported in research (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006), or lack of social skills. Tory described her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly, as shy like herself, and I observed some instances of watchful reserve in Tory but there were no indications of clinical social shyness. Still, I believe that the reason for the creation of imaginary companions is not particularly noteworthy here. Of note is Tory and Kyleigh’s ability to fill the need for companionship independently. That ability is a unique quality and makes Tory and Kyleigh distinctly different from children without imaginary companions. Both Tory and Kyleigh have been consistently observed in play with their imaginary companions, and the child-participants readily share their imaginary companions with their families. These results both confirm and challenge findings that remind researchers to approach the use of parental reports with caution as first-born children with imaginary companions may be more often noticed by parents or that later-born children may not readily share their imaginary companions (Hoff, 2005).
Kyleigh is part of a collection of moderately spaced siblings, the first-born of the second set of children, and an older sister to a newborn baby brother. Research indicates that the appearance of an imaginary companion in the life of the first-born child often occurs preceding or following the birth of a second child (Klein, 1985; Manosevitz et al., 1974). Kyleigh’s parents reported that she has enjoyed play with other imaginary companions, and Nile and Didi were created preceding the recent baby’s birth.

The family contexts of both Tory and Kyleigh could be described as active. While Tory is an only child, she enjoys play with many cousins, roller derby friends, and schoolmates. In a household of five busy children, Kyleigh spends significant time in solitary play. Family environmental type has been found to be correlated with children’s imaginary companion play; rather than quiet contexts, active family contexts in which children and family members share activities and discussion are more likely to produce imaginary companion play (Manosevitz et al., 1974). The family contexts of both child-participants feature multiple shared activities like cooking and storytelling, and both families engage in regularly shared discussion ranging from quiet to animated types.

In recent well-known studies, parents have reported that some imaginary companions were created out of admiration for real people like friends and siblings, catchy names, story characters, superheroes, and media figures (Hoff, 2005; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Singer & Singer, 1981; Taylor, Cartwright, & Carlson, 1993). Kyleigh’s mother suggested that perhaps Nile was based on a
performer from the pop group One Direction. Kyleigh described Nile as a boy with blond hair who lives with his family. While Kyleigh explained that Nile was a good dancer, she never mentioned One Direction, nor did she provide a performance-life reference, like singing, in any of her interview responses or conversations. Research indicates that parents usually verify the descriptions of their children’s imaginary companions, and it would be logical to assume this is because their children offer specific descriptions of their imaginary companions (Gleason, et al., 2000; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). However, during the course of this study, Kyleigh has not shared any information that directly locates the origin of her imaginary companion, Nile, with One Direction.

The child-participants offered rich descriptions of Emily the Butterfly, Nile, and Didi; these descriptions were confirmed by the parent-participants. Other than the birth of Kyleigh’s baby brother, neither set of parents was able to identify a possible triggering event for the creation of their child’s imaginary companion. In fact, research indicates that fairly little is really known about the reason for the appearance children’s imaginary companions; Masih (1978) maintained that greater than 50% of all imaginary companions have no identifiable triggering event. The same is true for the demise of most imaginary companions drawn from research, but other researchers have not met Kyleigh.

The mother of child-participant #1 reported that the imaginary companions of Tory's very early childhood simply faded away or seemed to be replaced by new pretend friends. This is consistent with research that suggests
that most imaginary companions, like old toys and activities that are no longer challenging, are discarded due to boredom or no identifiable reason (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004). However, occasionally the demise of an imaginary companion is reported by parents and described by the child as a “real” death (Kastenbaum & Fox, 2008). Kyleigh presented the demise of several of her imaginary companions as realistic deaths complete with vivid imagery of violence and expressions of deep emotional grief. Although I presented the parent-participant’s report in Chapter 5, Kyleigh’s description of “real” death is striking and warrants further consideration and analysis.

Kyleigh’s mother explained an incident that occurred about six months prior to her daughter’s participation in my study:

*She (Kyleigh) makes up such believable stuff with all these details. The one night she sat out at the hostess stations and (the hostess) came back in tears and said, “Oh, I didn’t know Kyleigh’s friend died in a car crash. I had no idea. That’s so terrible.” And I told her that she didn’t. Kyleigh sat out there and told her this girl’s name and how old she was – she was three. She told her how long they’d been friends; that they’d met at daycare, and all about the accident. She told (the hostess) that the little girl had died, and (the hostess) was like, almost crying. I said that nobody had died in a car accident, and that I didn’t know what she was talking about. But she (Kyleigh) had enough real like details that this sixteen...*
year-old girl thought that a little girl had really died in a car accident. And that was one of her (Kyleigh’s) pretend friends.

During my data collection sessions with child-participant #1, Tory, Kyleigh described a collective death of several of her (then) current imaginary companions. I recorded the incident in my anecdotal journal and shared with Kyleigh’s parents the following story:

Kyleigh told Tory and me about her five friends who got in an accident on your couch because you (the father) were playing a dangerous video game, and three of them got hurt and didn’t live through it. She used such vivid details that it took me a minute to realize that she was talking about her pretend friends. She said that two of them made it out ok but can’t play in the living room anymore because it’s such a violent Star Wars game. I remember that she used the terms “violent” and “terrible accident.”

Clearly the high level of detail and the consistent context of violent death attached to the demise of Kyleigh’s imaginary companions align with research that reports that some children report a “real” death at their imaginary companion’s demise (Kastenbaum & Fox, 2008). Kyleigh may also have enhanced imagery skills as suggested by Mantering and Taylor (2009), for she is truly adept at creating and manipulating visual imagery in the death reports of her imaginary companions.
Parental Reports

Interview and conversation data in this study was obtained from two child-participants and four parent-participants. For child-participant #1, Tory, the mother acted as the main participating parent. Both the mother and father of child-participant#2, Kyleigh, were fully involved in data collection. Interview sessions with parent-participants were conducted and completed-in-full before I initiated data collection sessions with the child-participants. The child-participants were not present during interview sessions with the parent-participants, and so parent-participants’ reports were based on information they obtained prior to the onset of this study.

During data collection sessions with the child-participants, a parent-participant was always in silent attendance in the same room or an adjoining room. Parents did not interact or participate during data my collection sessions with the child-participants. Any new information parent-participants may have heard because of proximity to the child-participant data collection sessions was therefore not collected and not used in this study.

The parent-participants in this study were well informed about their children’s imaginary companions. Tory’s mother shared a summary of Tory’s imaginary companion’s identification and description: She’s Emily the Butterfly... Mostly, she (Tory) talks about her colors, which are very beautiful, and her ability to fly. The mother explained that Emily the Butterfly lives at their house, eats and sleeps with Tory, rides in the car, and goes to school. She pointed out that
Tory had sometimes blamed previous imaginary companions for her own naughty actions, but described Emily the Butterfly as *a pretty good girl*. Tory’s mother’s reports of Emily the Butterfly were confirmed during my interview and conversation data collection sessions with Tory.

Kyleigh’s parents were very knowledgeable concerning her personified object imaginary companions and invisible imaginary companions, Nile and Didi. The mother reported: *Like she has this little collection of black walnuts all dressed up and wrapped in towels and tissues in a bowl, and they are her babies. They have names.* Didi was described by the mother as *a pretend friend(s)*... *sometimes Didi is a cat, sometimes she’s a dog, sometimes she’s a best friend.* The parents described Nile by his actions; for instance, Nile texts, was in jail and a car accident, and does not reside with Kyleigh’s family. Kyleigh’s parents’ reports were confirmed during interview and conversation data collection sessions, as Kyleigh offered identical or similar details about her personified walnut family, Nile, and Didi.

Parent-participants’ information about their children’s imaginary companion play was checked against information offered by the child-participants during data collection sessions and indicated closely aligned parent and child knowledge. This agreement is indicated in studies conducted by Bouldin (2006) and Gleason (2004) that found that parents’ reports agreed with children’s reports for general descriptions of imaginary companions.
Parental Reactions

Parental reactions to their children’s imaginary companion play were varied. Tory’s mother proudly explained: *I think she has a great imagination and is creative. I think she has a lot of fun making this stuff up. And I’m glad she has an IC.* She proudly described Tory as: *She’s very imaginative... She’s very good at ad-libbing and coming up with a lot of things on the spot.* The mother was delighted and sometimes surprised by her daughter’s powers of imagination and depth of creativity. Kyleigh’s parents cited and are continually surprised by her creativity and independence; her parents were pleased that Kyleigh entertained herself by creating imaginary companions. The self-report reactions from Tory’s mother and Kyleigh’s parents are confirmed by research on parental reactions to children’s imaginary companion play in which parents demonstrated surprise (Jalongo, 1984) and pride in their children’s powers of imagination (Svendsen, 1934).

Sometimes, parents worry that a child who engages in imaginary companion play is confused about the distinction between fantasy and reality or that the child is being drawn toward a tendency to lie (Svendsen, 1934; Taylor, 1999). Kyleigh’s mother identified her earlier concern about Kyleigh’s vivid imaginary companion play: *I was a little concerned that it might make her lie later, but (the father) wasn’t worried about it.* During our first parent-participant interview, the mother expressed concern about Kyleigh’s generation of violent and detailed death reports to explain the demise of several imaginary
companions: *That’s my only real fear about this kind of pretend play – that most of her really vivid imaginary friends seem to meet their demise in some awful way.*

None of the parent-participants suggested that their child’s creation of an imaginary companion might signal loneliness or lack of real friends as is typically parents’ chief concern (Gleason, Sebanc, and Hartup, 2000; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006). Usually, parents – both mothers and fathers – see imaginary companion play as typical for a young child (Gleason, 2005). Tory’s mother engaged in imaginary companion play as a child and has shared stories about George the Duck with Tory. Imaginary companion play is seen as normative childhood behavior in both Tory’s and Kyleigh’s families, and despite their concerns, Kyleigh’s parents view her imaginary companion play as not only typical, but beneficial. The mother explained: *(She’s) just too smart. I don’t know what we’ll do with her... (the father)thinks that it’s great because she’ll be smarter for it. He says she’s very intelligent.* The father concluded: *Really smart.*

**Defining Feature: Friendship**

In chapter 2, “Theoretical and Research Context of the Study,” I recognized friendship, ownership, and imagination as the defining features of children’s imaginary companion play; of these, perhaps the most obvious defining feature of imaginary companion play is friendship due to its similarity to real friendships. Imaginary companion play is classified as pretend, sustained role play (Harris, 2000) that relies on child-initiated, simulated social interaction
as its vehicle. Tory and Kyleigh play, pretend, talk, laugh, worry, share daily life, and negotiate a variety of incidents with their real friends; likewise Tory and Kyleigh interact in a very similar manner with their imaginary companions. Both child-participants described complex, long-term relationships that resemble friendships with their imaginary companions.

Emily the Butterfly is the same age as Tory and lives with her; they sleep together, share rituals of daily life like mealtimes, and visit Tory’s grandmother. Together, Tory and Emily the Butterfly ride in the family car and school bus, attend preschool, read books, and play with dolls. Tory and her imaginary companion share fantastic feats like flying in the sky and roller skating at high speed. Tory explained her gestures of friendship to Emily the Butterfly; for instance Tory gave her favorite doll to Emily and would let Emily be the winner in their bike race. When Emily was tired, Tory wrapped Emily in her warm robe. Tory respects Emily’s shyness, recognizes her talents, and spoke admiringly about Emily’s empathy for a troubled child in Tory’s class. Results indicate that Tory engages in child-initiated, simulated social interaction with her imaginary companion, her friend, Emily the Butterfly. Tory speaks affectionately and intimately about Emily the Butterfly, as if she is a peer. (Emily’s newborn sister, Sparkle, is also the recipient of Tory’s affection but in a more provisional, caretaking manner). Tory’s loving regard for Emily is supported by other observations in research: “Children often love their imaginary companions very
much, sometimes even more than their real friends” (Taylor, 1999 p. 113). It is apparent that Tory loves Emily the Butterfly.

Kyleigh’s imaginary companions include invisible friends, Nile and Didi, and a personified family of walnuts. Offering nurturance and care to the personified family of walnuts, Kyleigh assumes a caretaking relationship as evidenced in research by Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup (2000). Invisible friend Nile lives with his own family, visits Kyleigh at her request, and is the subject of numerous calamities like incarceration and car accidents. Kyleigh describes Nile as her tall, blond boyfriend who plays monsters with her. She explained: *Him, he, he likes me. He’s my boyfriend.* Kyleigh stated that there was nothing she didn’t like about Nile, but sometimes Nile’s behaviors trouble Kyleigh. She told me: *Yeah, but sometimes he does stuff. I can’t know about... Sometimes not so much that’s good.* Kyleigh’s statements about Nile may mimic real friendships with actual friends, where children create conflicts with imaginary companions, express anger and resentment, and sometimes even fear their imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999). The central function of Kyleigh’s relationship with Nile appears to be companionship. Kyleigh expresses admiration for Nile, who is more competent than herself, and she often adopts the role of a spectator. For example, she watches Nile dance and ride a bicycle, but Kyleigh does not dance or ride a bicycle with him.
Didi, who manifests as a cat, dog, or invisible person, is Kyleigh’s other imaginary companion. Kyleigh identifies Didi as *my friend*, and our interview conversation confirms her friendship status with both Didi and Nile. It follows:

*No, hers doesn’t have a family. Her has friends.*

Like you?

*Yeah, I’m her friend.*

Like Nile?

*Yeah.*

Because Didi has no family of her own, she lives and sleeps with Kyleigh, and they share family routines. Didi and Kyleigh play with dolls and roll down the hill in companionable play. Nile and Kyleigh text, but Didi and Kyleigh share stories. Didi is occasionally implicated in small acts of deviance; Kyleigh blamed Didi for her own messy closet. Kyleigh speaks with affection and warmth about Didi, and it appears that Didi enhances Kyleigh’s sense of worth. This is evidenced in Kyleigh’s statements: *she’s my friend,* (and) *I’m her friend.*

In analysis, I believe that the essential components of friendship are indicated in both Tory’s and Kyleigh’s relationships with their imaginary companions. It is likely that a possible overlap between friendship concepts exists as well. A study by Gleason and Hohmann (2006), focused on real and imaginary friends, investigated concepts regarding reciprocal, unilateral, imaginary, and non-friends by identifying five benefits of relationships, or social provisions based on the Network of Relationships Inventory developed by
Furman and Buhrmester (1985). The five social provisions are: companionship, intimacy, reliable alliance, affection, and enhancement of worth. Tory’s relationship with Emily the Butterfly resembles a true reciprocal friendship, and Tory clearly expressed instances of companionship, intimacy, reliable alliance, affection, and enhancement of worth. Tory has created a *pretend friend*, Emily the Butterfly, who provides the affection and benefits similar to a *real people friend*. Kyleigh’s creation of Didi also provides a reciprocal friendship with all five social provisions, but may also be an indication of overlap of concepts that comprise Kyleigh’s understanding of real-life friends and pretend friends. For instance, I believe Didi functions as a reciprocal friend, but her additional contribution to Kyleigh’s life overlaps the role of guardian. Didi is Kyleigh’s reliable protector, and as Kyleigh explains:

*She (Didi) sleeps. Then she wakes me up... If something happened, if somebody came in my room, Didi wakes me up if something happens.*

From my observations, Kyleigh’s older sister demonstrated protective behaviors toward Kyleigh, like reminding her to stay on the sidewalk and buttoning her jacket. Kyleigh’s sister is a provider and protector, and Kyleigh’s imaginary companion, Didi, is as well. It is possible that Kyleigh’s concepts of real-life friends and pretend friends overlap.

Gleason and Hohmann reported in study results:

Children did not draw sharp distinctions between imaginary companions and best friends on the social provisions of conflict, power, instrumental
help, and nurturance. The concepts that underlie children’s relationships with imaginary companions may thus overlap. (2006, p.141)

Results in this study indicated that the type and possible psychodynamic mechanisms that are traditionally identified with gender may be more fluid that previously thought. Both Tory and Kyleigh created imaginary companions who are either more or less competent than themselves, and this is consistent with research. However, Emily the Butterfly and Nile can perform fantastic feats. Emily can fly and skate with great speed; Nile has miraculously survived several motor vehicle accidents and can physically travel at instantaneous speed. Research indicates that it is typically boys, as opposed to girls like Tory and Kyleigh, who invent highly competent imaginary companions (Harter & Chao, 1992). However, both girls also created imaginary companions with deficits requiring realistic, life-like support and care; Emily requires Tory’s warm robe, and the personified walnut family needs Kyleigh’s dedicated rocking, feeding, and cooing. With both invisible friends and personified objects, Tory and Kyleigh have created and sustained long-term relationships with their imaginary companions, and so results from this study indicate friendship as the central defining feature of imaginary companion play.

**Defining Feature: Ownership**

The child alone creates, directs, and dictates the imaginary companion; Tory and Kyleigh are the true owners of their imaginary companions and the friendships. Even in the case of Kyleigh’s personified object imaginary companion
play with the walnut family, which is physically tangible, she is still the creator and owner of the invented and invisible personalities. Friedberg (1995) explained that “... as a result of their invisibility to others, imaginary companions are the child’s true possessions. Accordingly, they do not have to be shared, and so the child remains in complete control of the object” (p. 2). Representations of ownership were evident in multiple demonstrations and explanations by both Tory and Kyleigh.

Research reports that during imaginary companion play fantasy, the will, actions, speech, and emotions of the imaginary companion are subject to the child’s control and direction (Partington & Grant, 1984). During interview sessions and conversation, Tory described flying high in the sky on Emily the Butterfly’s back, and explained that neither she nor Emily were scared. Emily’s actions, like drinking nectar and riding the school bus, are productions of Tory’s mind. Tory created Emily’s beautiful, unique singing that was really pretty and different. You wouldn’t know her singing. Tory’s emotional knowledge of Emily the Butterfly is demonstrated in Emily’s empathetic understanding of Lela as sad... because she got in trouble and Emily knows that. In one instance, the action of Emily the Butterfly is identified by Tory as her own choice as she explained:

Sometimes when we don’t have a lot of flowers and she tries to go somewhere, but it’s ok with me – she goes away to get some nectar.
During Tory's first artistic production task, she verbally claimed ownership and authorship of Emily the Butterfly by explaining:

Well, this is Emily the Butterfly. She is my friend, and I can see her, because here I just drew her like she really is. She is very beautiful with sparkle and shiny things. If you had some really good crayons, like the sparkly kind, I could really draw a good one for you... See these round purple parts – they would be very shiny and sparkle a lot. It would not even have to be in the daytime. Oh, oh – and this paper is kinda little. It should be really big because Emily the Butterfly is really big. I showed you before, remember?

Figure 1: Emily the Butterfly
Tory’s verbal claim reinforces research that reports children claim authorship of the personal characteristics of their imaginary companions (Taylor & Mottweiler, 2008).

The will, actions, speech, and emotions of Kyleigh’s imaginary companions, Nile and Didi, are subject to her control and direction. For example, Kyleigh reveals the will, actions, and emotions of Nile, who lives at his own house, in the following interview segment:

(Nile) comes to my house sometimes. And he likes to dance. But I don’t dance with him. Him dances by his own self... (We play) like monsters, I guess. Funny monsters. Them not scary. I’m not scared of them... Yeah, we aren’t scared of them.

Kyleigh not only exercise authorship of Nile’s person, she also retains control of the dissemination of shared information about Nile. When I mentioned, your mom told me that Nile had to be in jail for a while, Kyleigh responded: I don’t think she knows about that. Cause it’s over now. Including the artistic production tasks in this study offered child-participants an opportunity to identify personal characteristics of their imaginary companions and claim ownership. During her first artistic production task, Kyleigh and I had the following conversation:

I’m gonna color a picture of all of us making pancakes. Look here. This is Pap making pancakes. And we are all eating them up with syrup and chocolate chips (slurping noises)... Here is Mom and Jem, Pap, I told you.
And this is [Tory’s mother]. Gram is right here. I sit by Gram. And right here is Nile. And them’s is all my babies, you know, my baby birds.

What are the baby birds doing?

Well, they are eating pancakes. And Nile is having no pancakes.

Nile is having no pancakes?

No, he like yogurt.

Figure 8 My People Eat Pancakes at Pap’s

Kyleigh demonstrated multiple representations of ownership regarding her imaginary companions. Nile, Didi, and the personified family of walnuts exist and evolve under the sole authority of Kyleigh, and these results agree with research findings reported by Taylor and Mannering (2006). Results from the case studies of Tory and Kyeigh lend credibility to my identification of ownership as the
second defining feature of imaginary companion play. Perhaps Kyleigh’s simple statement is the best evidence of ownership as a defining feature of imaginary companion play; she said: *Hers is just mine.*

**Defining Feature: Imagination**

For young children, friendship and ownership are defining features of imaginary companion play, and Tory and Kyleigh offered multiple representations of friendship and ownership in their expressions of play with their imaginary companions. However, the parent-participants referred more to their children’s imaginations; this aligns with research in which adult reports often included references to their children’s imaginations when discussing imaginary companions (Gleason, 2004). The case studies of Tory and Kyleigh reinforce my identification of imagination as the third defining feature of imaginary companion play.

Giftedness is often associated with creativity and imagination, and children who generate imaginary companions are often described as gifted and creative. Researchers have interpreted imaginary companions as products of a creative mind (Singer & Singer, 1990) and a representation of increased creative potential (Smith & Carlsson, 1990). Imaginary companion play is drawn from the imagination and is classified as imaginative play in Hughes’s taxonomy of play (2006). Several definitions of imaginative play were presented and discussed at length in chapter 2; those that are foundational to this chapter’s deep analysis are presented here. Else (2009) defines imaginative play as:
where the child plays outside the confines of the physical world and plays with things that are not really there or could not really happen. Examples include: imagining you are, or pretending to be, a tree or car, or having a friend who isn’t there. (p. 79)

Tory has generated her invisible friend, Emily the Butterfly, and Tory’s mother explained: *I think she has a great imagination and is creative... She’s very imaginative. She’ll probably come up with lots of stories. She’s very good at ad-libbing and coming up with a lot of things on the spot.* Kyleigh invented Nile and Didi as invisible friends and created a personified family of walnuts. Her parents recognized Kyleigh’s imagination by describing her as *smart, really intelligent, creative,* and *she talks to people who aren’t there... Yeah, she can talk about what’s real.* By all participant accounts, Tory and Kyleigh have friends who aren’t there.

Imagination is conceptualized as free and ultimately boundless. I have often heard imagination connected with phrases like “running away with” and “got the best of” as if imagination reigns over the will of the child. Certainly, imaginary companion play is based in “… pretense that goes beyond the child’s experiences” (Goncu and Gaskins, 2006, p. 7). Kyleigh’s parents’ reports and concerns raised an interesting possible overlap of imagination, the will of the child, and pretense that surpasses the experience of the child. Kyleigh created vivid, violent death reports to explain the demise of several of her former imaginary companions, and she directly shared these various narratives with the
hostess at the inn, her parents, and me. She delivered these death reports with
graphic detail and visible expressions of emotional grief. Kyleigh generated these
reports in her imagination and shared them of her own free will. Her parents
maintain that Kyleigh has had no experience with violent death. This raised a
question for me: What is the relationship between the imagination of the child,
the will of the child, and pretense that surpasses the experience of the child?

Kyleigh’s mother’s greatest concern is that her daughter’s imaginary
companions seem to meet their demise in a violent manner. Yet Kyleigh’s
expressions of imaginary violent death are short-lived, and she is a light-hearted,
upbeat young child. Kyleigh appears to easily navigate the boundaries between
fantasy and reality. Her parents have addressed their concerns to Kyleigh and
reported: And if we ask her about something pretend, she looks at us like we’re
the stupid ones. The ease with which both Tory and Kyleigh express their
imaginations through imaginary companion play and navigate the boundaries of
pretense and reality offer additional agreement to an explanation by Spitz
(2006): “Although we speak of the imagination as free and unfettered, we do in
fact retain mastery over it. We can always return from it to the world of
everyday reality. Children learn this best” (p.212). Tory and Kyleigh demonstrate
the ability to traverse the boundaries of reality and fantasy; their ability can be
seen as a hallmark of imagination and imaginative play, for it characterizes a
unique quality of imaginary companion play.
As an example of the fluidity of young children’s movement between fantasy and reality, children do not demonstrate confusion in their imaginative thinking and imaginative play concerning imaginary companions. Research shows that children understand that their imaginary companions are different from their real friends (Gleason, 2004; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Taylor, 1997). Tory demonstrated clear recognition of the difference between her real friends and her imaginary companion in the following interview discussion:

*But we mostly play pretend games in our school (with) Allison, and Jill, and Lena. And Emily.*

Did you tell me – let’s see – Lena, Jill, Allison, Pete, Hallie – Did you tell me you had an Emma or Emily at your school?

*Yeah, 2 girls at my school. I have Emily and Emma. Emma is in kindergarten now. But I have an Emily in my class.*

Emily – you mean Emily the Butterfly?

*No, the real Emily at my school. She’s a girl, but I have Emily the Butterfly too. So, that’s 3 really (counting on fingers) – Emma, Emily the real girl, and Emily the Butterfly. That’s 3.*

Kyleigh also differentiated between real friends and pretend friends during interview conversation. She identified Tory and cousins as real friends, and then I inquired about pretend friends. Our conversation follows:
Sometimes kids play with real friends like Tory, and sometimes they play with pretend friends that they make up. Do you ever play with pretend friends that you make up?

Do you know about some other friends?

I think I might, but I’m wondering what you can tell me. Do you have any friends that you make up or pretend about?

Like these? (Kyleigh runs to get small bowl with about 10 multi-size walnuts, some wrapped in pieces of paper towel with cotton balls).

Neither Tory nor Kyleigh demonstrated confusion in their imaginative thinking and imaginative play with their imaginary companions. They clearly articulated that their imaginary companions were different from their real friends; this finding further supports the link between imaginary companion play and imagination by representing the fluidity of young children’s movement between pretense and reality (Gleason, 2004; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006). As explained by Taylor (1999), the creation of an imaginary companion may serve to sharpen children’s awareness of the fantasy/reality distinction and increase children’s ability to purposely differentiate between fantasy and reality.

The child-participants in this study demonstrated representations of imaginative play and generated statements recognizing the difference between fantasy and reality. At this point in my deep analysis, I remind the reader that this study is an exploratory case study of two young children, and data were drawn from interviews, conversations, observations, narrative task productions,
and artistic and dramatic task productions. Therefore, I consider that the child-participants may or may not believe that imaginary representations can be reflected in reality, and this study offers no conclusions about the extent to which imaginary representation could be reflected in reality. Other research thoroughly investigates the fantasy predisposition of children with and children without imaginary companions (Bouldin, 2006; Bouldin & Pratt, 2001). My final discussion of this section, child-participants’ predisposition to fantasy, should be considered reflective in nature but not an evaluation of child behavior.

Several questions in the child-participant imaginary companion and imaginative play interview were specifically designed to encourage child-participant representations of daydreams and striking mental imagery. Child-participant #1, Tory, shared multiple reports that contained vivid representations of mental imagery. In the midst of her initial description of Emily the Butterfly, Tory clarified details as she leaned close and whispered:

_They’re stripes. They are beautiful stripes. Her pink stripes are sparkly, and her purple stripes are not. She’s very shiny sometimes; it’s beautiful._

Later, during her first artistic production task, Tory stated:

_She is my friend, and I can see her, because here I just drew her like she really is. She is very beautiful with sparkle and shiny things._

Evidence of Kyleigh’s sharp representations of her mental imagery occurred often; her second artistic production task offers complex details of Nile
and Didi and also includes Tory’s imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly. Our conversation during collaborative drawing follows:

So, this is Nile. Him’s shirt is green. This crayon shakes. Now, you make something.

You tell me what.

Make Emily, Tory’s butterfly girl.

How should I draw her? Have you seen her?

Nope, but Tory told me she is sparkly wing and everything to fly.

Ok, here she is with sparkling wings.

Now, see her green shirt? I drew it like Nile.

Oh wow. Can Emily see that it’s like Nile’s?

Yes, actually she can see his shirt, but not seeing him looking, too.

How’s that?

Him’s eyes are not here. See?

Oh, yes, I see that now. What about Didi?

I made her right, right here. Emily is flying up to her. Didi, her’s flying very high too.

Oh, Didi can fly?

That’s why she can be so way up in the sky.

Kyleigh’s complex description of Nile and Didi is evidence of her ability to create vivid mental images. Her inclusion of Emily the Butterfly, the imaginary companion of Tory, may be a demonstration of Kyleigh’s fantasy disposition.
Research shows that children’s ability to create mental images and
demonstration of a fantasy disposition may indicate that children with imaginary
companions have a predisposition to fantasy (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001).

Although Tory generates highly complex details about Emily the Butterfly, she
recognizes that her imaginary representation is not reflected in reality. For
instance, she understands that children and teachers at school do not share her
mental representations as evidenced during our conversation:

*They don’t know about her; they really don’t.*

Do any of the kids at school know her?

*Just me.*

Do any of your teachers know her?

*Nope.*

Does anyone know she’s there?

*Nobody sees her, just me. They can’t see her, because they don’t even
know that she’s really even there.*

How do you know she’s there?

*Because, ah, I don’t figure that one out really. I just know.*

Tory also understands that the mental representations of others, like children at
school, are not reflected in reality. We discussed daydreams, and our
conversation follows:

Do you know what daydreaming is?

*Oh yeah, you look at something and if someone calls you, you don’t hear
them. And you look like this (vacant, unblinking stare). Pete does it at*
school, and the teacher says "Pete, stop daydreaming." I heard her say that. And he was just looking and looking.

Do you ever daydream?

No. And then I’m thinking, but not daydreaming, because then you can get in trouble.

So do you know what Pete was daydreaming about today?

No, that’s his business. I can’t tell.

Did the teacher know?

She just knew he was daydreaming because he didn’t hear his name, and he looked like this (stares, unblinking).

Tory recognizes that although the physical behaviors signifying daydreaming, that can be problematic in school, can be observed, neither she nor the teacher can have knowledge of Pete’s daydream.

Tory’s representations of mental imagery regarding her experience at the ocean and her fear of the waves is exceptional; she explained: I really, really remember it, and I was very scared. The water would not stop coming at me.

She connects the memory of this frightening event with her dreams telling me: I have night dreams, and sometimes they’re actually nightmares... You remember I told you about the ocean thing? Well, I dream about I get lost at the ocean (shivering), and (whispering) it is so scary. I have to go to Mommy and Daddy’s room... Well, I thought I was at the ocean. Tory’s dream aspect of fantasy experience may indicate that she is more prone to fantasy predisposition
Representations of purely mental imagery are related to fantasy disposition (Singer, 1977).

Tory makes a distinction which may represent the extent to which she believes that her imaginary representation can be reflected in reality. Describing her pre-sleep play, she said: *Oh, yeah, but it’s not a dream really. I turn the blanket into mountains, and there’s a volcano, and dinosaurs, and other creatures. That’s not scary; it’s my bed. I make it have lava.* Tory’s pre-sleep play, like her verbal play on the school bus, is evidence of well-developed awareness of imaginative play opportunities. Awareness of imaginative play opportunities is a factor linked with imaginary companion play in research (Somers & Yawky, 1984). I asked Tory about making up stories in her head about people she doesn’t know, and she told me: *Like the lady who looked like a witch? Mommy said she couldn’t help it, and she wasn’t really a witch. No, I don’t do that.* This could be considered a delightful negation of what really transpired in Tory’s head and reveals the quality of her personal fantasy inclination as also seen in recent research (Bouldin, 2006). Perhaps Tory’s most succinct imaginary representation is also her most brief. She explained the scenario of her artistic production task #2, Friends to Play with at School:

*We’re all laughing. But Lena is swinging around.*

(I noticed that Tory had not drawn herself in the picture.) Tell me where you are, I asked.

*I’m drawing the picture.*
Both Tory and Kyleigh demonstrated representations of vivid mental imagery in imaginary companion play and imaginative play. This could be an indication that the mental imagery ability of the child-participants in this study is related to fantasy disposition and that children with imaginary companions have a predisposition to fantasy (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001; Singer, 1977).

Fantasy predisposition and fantasy style for young children who participate in imaginary companion play is seen in the type of imaginative play they choose. At the time of my study, Kyleigh was engaged on imaginary companion play with two invisible friends, Nile and Didi, and a personified family of walnuts. Research shows there is a connection between imaginary companion play and role play; children whose imaginary companions manifested as personified objects demonstrated a greater degree of role play than children who did not have imaginary companions. Caretaking behaviors are prominent in Kyleigh’s relationship with her personified walnut family. She explained:

*Rock and rock these babies... I have to take care of my babies. They very, very little. You have to cook for them. You have to feed them.*

Caretaking behaviors are also evident in Kyleigh’s pretend play with her dolls; she reminded me: *They’re babies, you know.* I observed Kyleigh’s role of nurturer during short play episodes with Tory and other small children at the inn. In play and real-life interactions, Kyleigh assumes the role of nurturer.

The case studies of Tory and Kyleigh point to imagination, as evidenced by imaginative play, fantasy/reality distinction, and fantasy disposition-
predisposition-style as the final defining feature of imaginary companion play.

While researchers may fractionate the defining features for study, children, like Tory and Kyleigh, dynamically experience the three defining features of imaginary companion play: friendship, ownership, and imagination.

In summary, this first section of chapter 6 answers the research questions: what is imaginary companion play; and what are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions? From this study, rich descriptions of imaginary companion play and imaginative play resulted. Specific information regarding terms, definitions, and gender-related imaginary companion play were reported. Results regarding the family structure and appearance of the imaginary companion both confirmed and challenged previous research (Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor, 1999). There was a striking agreement between child-participant and parent-participant reports that indicate closely aligned parent and child knowledge also seen in previous research (Bouldin, 2006; Gleason, 2004). Parental reactions varied from pride in their child’s creativity and intelligence to worry about potential lying and violent imaginary death reports; parent-participants’ reactions are found in previous research (Jalongo, 1984; Taylor, 1999). Finally, results indicate that the friendship, ownership, and imagination are defining features of imaginary companion play.

Results from this study indicate that Tory and Kyleigh possess qualities like increased levels of creative thought, awareness of imaginative play
opportunities, and original ideas regarding the use of objects in play; these qualities have also been reported in research (Somers and Yawky, 1984). Results also indicate child-participants’ ability to form vivid mental imagery in both imaginary companion play and imaginative play; results further point to a strong fantasy predisposition. This could be an indication that the mental imagery ability of the child-participants in this study is related to fantasy disposition and that children with imaginary companions have a predisposition to fantasy (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001; Singer, 1977). Beyond imaginary companion play, child-participants showed an inclination toward other forms of fantasy and fantasy play, like princess fantasy and wolf impersonation, and this inclination agrees with prior research (Bouldin, 2006; Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). The discussion concerning qualities like language and narrative skill, results from the assessment of narratives, and the connections between imaginary companion play and narrative skill are located in the following sections of chapter 6.

**Part 2: What is the Connection between Pretend Play and Narrative Skills?**

**Imaginary Companion Play and Storytelling**

Imaginary companion play is viewed as perhaps the most complex expression of play in early childhood (Klaussen & Passman, 2007; Triofi & Reese, 2009). Likewise, narrative, specifically decontextualized language, is one of the richest and most highly detailed linguistic expressions in early childhood (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Snow, 1983). For the purposes of this study, I
conceptualized narrative as a primary pathway of human cognitive activity that is learned and utilized by children to organize their thinking and make sense of the world (Bruner, 1985). Young children organize their existing knowledge, incorporate new information, play out perspectives, and generally make sense of the world through pretend play and narrative. Therefore, the connection between imaginary companion play and children’s narrative skills can be better understood by results of this study that address the theoretical base connecting pretend play and narrative.

Nicolopoulou (2007) locates both pretend play and narrative (storytelling) in a continuum ranging from:

...the discursive exposition of narratives in storytelling to their enactment in pretend play ... (in which) both play and storytelling should be viewed as complementary expressions of children’s symbolic imagination (p. 249).

Results from my study reveal the enmeshed, interrelated modes of storytelling and pretend play that were expressed by child-participants in narratives and descriptions of imaginary companion play scenarios. A profound example of pretend play and narrative commonality can be seen in Tory’s first artistic production task as she created a visual representation of her abstract, decontextualized, symbolic mental play. Her portrayal of Emily the Butterfly is accompanied by a strong narrative scenario (see Pellegrini & Galda, 1990) and is an expression of her symbolic imagination showing that she has the skill to “...draw from and reflect back on the interrelated domains of emotional, intellectual,
and social life” (Nicolopoulou, 2007, p.249). An example of decontextualization in both language and pretend play, Emily the Butterfly’s image (Figure 1) can be viewed in tandem with Tory’s narrative and is a complementary expression of pretend play and narrative (see also chapter 4 Artistic Production Task #4).

Open-ended interview questions and narrative provided entry points for child-participants’ demonstrations of imaginary companion play and narratives. Artistic and dramatic production tasks served to encourage additional conversational and behavioral manifestations of imaginary companion play and narrative. However, it was during impromptu, shared conversations and activities that the child-participants offered spontaneous narratives about their imaginary companion play. Multiple incidents occurred that demonstrate this research phenomenon; my favorite is presented here.

Kyleigh shared this story of rolling down a hill with Didi, her imaginary companion:

*I wanna tell you about Didi; she went outside and played and rolled down the hill. Uh-huh, we went outside to play. Her said to roll down the hill, so we did it.*

*It was so, so fast. And I screamed like this (screams). We do that. She’s my friend. We roll down the hill sometimes but not a lot. Yeah, her, she comes in the house and plays dolls with me. And she sleeps, too.*

Presented as a spontaneous personal event narrative, Kyleigh told the story using the five definitive elements associate with a sophisticated narrative:
sequence of events, meaning embedded in sequence, discourse, resolution, and implied evaluation (Bruner, 1996). Kyleigh’s hill-rolling session is a complex hybrid; she combines her symbolic pretend friend, the physical activity of actually rolling down the hill, and her retelling of the play; the result is a decontextualized, complementary expression of narrative and pretend play (Nicolopoulou, 2007). The resulting collection of child-participants’ spontaneous narratives about their imaginary companion play offers substantial evidence confirming Bruner’s scholarly work concerning the development of children’s narrative thinking in pretend play (1996) and undergirds Nicolopoulou’s (2007) model that conceptualizes pretend play and storytelling as partly separate and parallel activities which merge in the course of development.

**Explicit Language, Form, and Composition**

Child-participants in this study consistently used explicit language to create meaning and communicate their symbolic play. For example, Tory included Emily the Butterfly during our initial session. Also discussed in chapter 4, the scenario follows:

Tory ran into the hallway and slowly returned as she held the hand of her imaginary companion, Emily the Butterfly. When her mother expressed surprise that Emily the Butterfly was there, Tory explained, *She came because it’s about her, and she knows that.*

Tory’s explanation was intentional, explicit, and communicated abstract meaning. These results show an ability to demonstrate appropriate and accurate actions
and language of physically absent characters (Fein, 1989; Garvey, 1990; Nicolopoulou, 2007).

Results of this study also yielded information about the roles, settings, goals, and conflicts created by child-participants and enacted during play and discourse with their imaginary companions. Both Tory and Kyleigh shared stories about their episodes of pretend play with their imaginary companions, including retellings of their personal linguistic negotiations. For instance, Kyleigh explained: *Didi told me to roll down the hill*, and Kyleigh texted Nile and directed him to *come over right now*. Tory and Emily the Butterfly discussed *ice cream sundaes with whipped cream and sprinkles* and the best position for *holding baby Sparkle*. Results indicate that the child-participant linguistic negotiations with their imaginary companions and canonical elements evident in both pretend play and narrative reveal the similarities between pretend play and narrative; similarities include both form and composition. These findings add to previous, well-respected research regarding similarities between pretend play and narrative (Bruner, 1990; Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Sutton-Smith, 2000) and contribute to the expanding collection of research in which imaginary companion play is linked with young children’s linguistic and social-cognitive development (Bouldin, et al., 2002, Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor & Carlson, 1997; Trionfi & Reese, 2009).

Findings from this study confirm established similarities between pretend play and narrative that include: form, composition, distinct forms of
decontextualized symbolic thought in pretend play and narrative, (see also Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and contextualizing pretend play and narrative in a continuum of narrative activities (Nicolopoulou, 2002; 2007). The imaginary companion play and narratives demonstrated by the child-participants in this study required complex, symbolic mental and linguistic construction for creation and duration, and results show decontextualization in both imaginary companion play and narrative. My study therefore lends credibility to the theoretical expectation that similar decontextualization demonstrates a strong connection between pretend play and narrative skills for young children.

**Part 3: What are the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children?**

A central goal of this investigation is to extend existing research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by considering children’s narrative skills. In the third and final section of chapter 6, I offer deep analysis using the assessment of narrative(s) results and the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills.

Child-participant #1, Tory, was 4 years, 10 months of age at the initiation of this study. Child-participant #2, Kyleigh, was 3 years, 10 months of age at the beginning of this study and celebrated her fourth birthday during the fifth week
of data collection sessions. Results of this study show that both child-participants were able to construct and sustain a sophisticated discourse about past, present, and fictional events. They easily utilized language to represent reality out of its actual context during pretend play and narrative. Neither Tory nor Kyleigh was restricted to their own experience-based concept of events. Scholars conceptualize this shift to language representation as a process of dynamic transformation; this development is highly variable and signals a fundamental change in the manner that children make sense of their experiences (Haden, 2003; Nicolopoulou, 2002, 2007). The child-participants’ narrative skills were demonstrated during multiple narrative production tasks, contextualized in social interactions, and indicative of the process of dynamic transformation of decontextualization of both play and language.

**Assessment of Narrative Production Tasks #1-5**

To collect the narrative productions in this study, five types of narrative production tasks were included:

- Narrative Production Task #1: Story Listening and Retelling
- Narrative Production Task #2 Script Production
- Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narratives (PENS)
- Narrative Production Task #4a: Story Telling with Researcher Prompt
- Narrative Production Task #4b: Story Telling without Researcher Prompt
- Narrative Production Task #5: Story Listening and Extension
Narrative task productions were generated and collected for each child-participant; all original child-participant narrative task productions are included in chapters 4 and 5. My assessment of narratives according the Story Pyramid Framework (Curentont & Lucas, 2007) and a discussion of the results follow here.

**Results and Analysis: Assessment of Narrative Production Tasks #1-5**

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task #1:**

**Story Listening and Retelling**

Story retelling is traditionally a measure of story comprehension. Scholarly research regarding children’s narrative productions during story retelling is considered distinct from literature concerning children’s personal narratives (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; see also Trionfi and Reese, 2009); for instance story comprehension is distinct from personal event narratives. For purposes of this study, Narrative Production Task #1 Story Listening and Retelling was designed to function and be assessed as a measure of narrative production, not comprehension. The results from my assessment of narrative for this task follow for Tory and Kyleigh.

Tory’s retelling of *Little Rabbit Waits for the Moon* (Shoshan, 2004) contains all the components of a sophisticated story retelling. Her example is organized into C-units; it shows an average of 7.6 words per C-unit (MLCU
=7.59) across 72 C-units. Tory begins her narrative with a conventional story opening:

There was a little rabbit what could not get to sleep.

There’s the sun, and it’s sunny. But at the night, the sky falls down.

Her story ends with a traditional closing:

And that’s the end, but it doesn’t say anything about happily ever after.

That’s another story, like Beauty and the Beast.

The events in the story are presented temporally; for instance, the ideas are linked with the progression of the plot and illustrations. Tory’s ideas are linked in terms of psychological causation and demonstrated by statements such as:

And the little flower, just like the Little Rabbit, he’s not growed up either.

The little flower might grow bigger and bigger and turn into a tree or something... But the moon sees the Little Rabbit.

Another example of psychological causation in Tory’s narrative production is:

The moon doesn’t have any eyes on it. I think the moon is dreaming.

They said dreaming, remember. No, wait. The Little Rabbit is dreaming now, because he is sure now. He is sure he can go to sleep, because he is sure about the moon in the sky.

Both examples indicate the internal states of the flower, Little Rabbit, and the moon and even include how the characters feel about being Little Rabbit’s long wait for the moon. She uses internal state words like dreaming, scared, and sure. Tory presents a stable resolution at the end of the story by saying: He is sure he
can go to sleep, because he is sure about the moon in the sky. Tory uses Literate Language Features (LLF) like the adverbial phrases connected to the verb blowing in the following sentences: The wind was blowing very hard. All the leaves were blowing around the Little Rabbit. The production of high C-units, multiple story features, accurate temporal organization, descriptive LLF, and clear demonstration of character internal states indicate a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s retelling of Rosie’s Walk (Hutchins, 1968) contains all the components of a well developed story retelling. Her example is organized into C-units; it shows an average of 6.5 words per C-unit (MLCU =6.55) across 51 C-units. Kyleigh starts her narrative with a conventional story opening device; she states her version of the title Rosie takes a walk, and then she establishes the setting as they’re at the farm. To close the narrative, Kyleigh crafts a circular conclusion: She goes back to her little house. She did not get eated up. The events in the Kyleigh’s story retelling are presented temporally; for instance, the ideas are linked with the steady progression of the plot and illustrations. After identifying the characters as the hen and the fox, she easily describes the motive of the fox as: See him? Him wants to eat her.

Kyleigh’s ideas are connected in terms of psychological causation and demonstrated by clear statements such as:

Him goes into the bees and their houses.
Them so mad at him. Chase and chase him way over the hill to far away.

So him can’t eat the chicken. Bad fox.

Another example of psychological causation in Kyleigh’s narrative production is:

Them bees is her friends. They say, “Don’t you eat my friend, no, no” to the fox. They’re friends.

Both examples indicate the internal states of the bees and the fox and even include Kyleigh’s original dialogue telling how the bees feel about the fox. Kyleigh uses internal state words like ouch, mad, and bad, and she presents a reasonable resolution as a conclusion when she says:

Them bees is her friends. They say, “Don’t you eat my friend, no, no” to the fox. They’re friends.

She goes back to her little house. She did not get eated up.

Kyleigh employs Literate Language Features (LLF) like the adverbial phrases connected to the verbs jumping and walking in the following sentences:

Then him, that fox, jumping up over the hay to eat that chicken. But not yet, him doesn’t.

(and) The chicken, she just walking under the little houses with bees in them.

The text of Rosie’s Walk tells the only the story of Rosie the hen and her leisurely walk around the farmyard. The illustrations tell the story of the sneaky fox in constant, ill-fated pursuit of Rosie. It would be typical for a 4-year-old child to retell a story according to its illustrations. However, in her retelling Kyleigh
successfully integrated the story of the text with the story of the illustrations. For instance, she says:

*Rosie takes a walk. And they’re at the farm. See? Her is taking a walk.*

*A chicken, she is a chicken. See him? Him wants to eat her. Him jumping to her.*

(and) *The chicken, she just walking under the little houses with bees in them. Him goes into the bees and their houses.*

Kyleigh’s production of high C-units, strong multiple story features, and accurate temporal organization are strong components of story retelling. While she sometimes uses only basic syntax and semantics, she does offer descriptive literate language features (LLF). Most importantly, Kyleigh demonstrates significant skill in integrating the text and illustrations into one story; she also shows an understanding of characters’ internal states. For these reasons, I assess Kyleigh’s story retelling as a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

**Narrative Production Task #2 Script Production**

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task #2 Script Production:**

**Production: Script #1**

The reader is reminded that the assessment of scripted narratives is distinct from autobiographical or fictional story-like narratives due to the purpose of scripted narrative. Curenton & Lucas (2007) wrote of this difference: “Scripts are used to assess children’s ability to logically describe the sequence of a repeated, generalized event (and) the goal of a scripted narrative is to instruct”
Therefore, my assessment of child-participants’ narrative scripts focused on temporal order, key routine events, and level of detail (Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997).

Tory’s script production instructing the listener on how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich is organized into C-units; it shows an average of 7.2 words per C-unit (MLCU =7.25) across 8 C-units. She maintains a temporal order of events, like directing the listener to start with bread and then put jelly and peanut butter on the bread; she uses connectives like well, then, and that’s it to maintain temporal order. The key events of the routine of making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich are mentioned. Tory’s words like bread cut in triangles and paper towel indicate a distinguishing level of detail, while her conclusion of mm mm could be considered a representation of her internal state. Considering that Tory opened her script narrative with I tried to make one on my own once – a peanut butter and jelly one and closed it with her internal state mm, mm, this narrative should be classified as a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s script production instructing the listener on how to prepare cereal for breakfast is organized into C-units; it shows an average of 4.4 words per C-unit (MLCU =4.14) across 7 C-units. Kyleigh opens the script narrative with an orientation for the listener by saying: Sometimes, I make cereal. She maintains a temporal order of events, like directing the listener to start with putting the cereal in the bowl, add the milk, insert the spoon, and then eat the prepared cereal; she uses connectives like then and and to maintain temporal
order. The key events of the routine of preparing cereal for breakfast are presented. It is interesting that Kyleigh closes her narrative with: *And have some more*. Because Kyleigh opened her script narrative with *Sometimes, I make cereal* and closed it with *And have some more*, this narrative is circular in style and invites the listener to repeat the process of making and eating cereal. The structure and organization of Kyleigh’s script narrative is complete and would usually be classified as a Complex Pyramid. However, the lack of details is significant, and this narrative should therefore be described as an Intermediate Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task #2 Script**

**Production: Script #2**

Tory’s script production instructing the listener on how to make a smoothie shows an average of 7.5 words per C-unit (MLCU =7.46) across 13 C-units. She maintains a temporal order of events, like directing the listener toward a lengthy list of ingredients including: *fruit, milk, Greek yogurt in it, bananas, blueberries, strawberries, cantaloupe, and pineapple*. The key routine events like: *You put fruit and milk and Greek yogurt in it, and mostly fruit... just (blending noises) it up and drink (slurping noises)* are well described, but some key steps are not included. For instance, Tory could have indicated that the fruit could be washed, ingredients might be measured, and most importantly that a blender is used to process the ingredients. Tory’s extensive list of fruit indicates a distinguished level of general knowledge. Because Tory opened her instruction
with *we make smoothies* and concluded the script narrative by saying *and I’ll make smoothies sometimes, just (blending noises) it up and drink (slurping noises)*, it is reasonable to interpret the progression as an intentional statement. Although her language and temporal development align with Complex Pyramid, I would still classify this script narrative as an Intermediate Pyramid due to the absence of specific key routine steps (Currenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s script production with instructions about how to pack a diaper bag shows an average of 5.5 words per C-unit (MLCU = 5.55) across 9 C-units. She maintains a basic temporal order of events, like directing the listener to include diapers, clothes, wipes, and drinks. The key routine events like loading the diaper bag and choosing the drink are well described, and Kyleigh’s list of necessities indicates a functional level of general knowledge. Deeper knowledge could have encouraged Kyleigh to include items beyond those related to basic care, such as blankets, toys, and perhaps a pacifier. However, because Kyleigh’s narrative is based upon her experience of newborn care during the summertime months, these absent items should not be assessed negatively. Because Kyleigh opened her instruction with *I do that* and concluded with *that’s all – I know about it, Yes I do*; it is reasonable to interpret the progression as a statement of personal experience. Script narratives generally are concise and instructional in nature, but Kyleigh includes not only the what, but also the how and why in the following statement:

*Then get your baby and go shopping.*
Then if him poop, then you hafta go bathroom and change him.

Kyleigh’s language and temporal development align with Complex Pyramid, and I classify this script narrative as a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Assessment of Narrative Production Task #2 Script

Production: Script #3

Tory’s script production of bedroom cleaning instructions contains 8.6 words per C-unit (MLCU = 8.66) across 15 C-units. Tory begins her narrative by providing a rich description of her bedroom using LLF adjective phrases like pink princess crown and jewels that are white. She includes intention-based statements that orient the listener to the function of objects in her bedroom environment when she says:

And it’s (bed) a pink princess crown, and it has something that you put a little TV on or a tablet or food so you can eat there.

While not connected to temporal order or routine events typical in script production, Tory’s introduction provides clarity for the listener. Her narrative is nearly cyclic in nature, and she later includes the following causation statement: I’m maybe gonna get a TV in my room once I really sleep in it. Tory uses temporal words to introduce her steps like: well, first, and that’s all. She organizes steps for cleaning in logical order; for instance, she says:

Well, you vacuum it, but first put all your toys somewhere like inside a bench or on the shelves.
The central routine events: vacuuming, dusting, and making the bed, are all presented along with Tory’s advice to the listener to: Make it neat, so you don’t have to do it again. The high level of detail, not typically found in a script narrative, and excellent temporal and routine event coverage indicate that this narrative belongs in the Complex Pyramid category (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s script production instructing the listener on how to feed a dog shows an average of 6.8 words per C-unit (MLCU = 6.80) across 5 C-units. She maintains a temporal order of events, like directing the listener toward the basic elements like food, water, and bowl(s). The key routine steps are included:

You get it food and put it in a bowl, the food you do.
Then you get water in the bowl, another bowl.

However, some key steps are not included. For instance, Kyleigh could have described opening the bag of dog food or drawing the water. She does specify another bowl for the water making it distinct from the bowl for the food. Kyleigh crafts an excellent conclusion by saying: Then the dog drinks it and eats it.

Although the temporal development is logical, Kyleigh’s uses limited inclusion of key routine events and distinguishing details; therefore I classify this script narrative as an Intermediate Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task #2 Script Production: Script #4**

Tory’s script production/personal event narrative about giving Piper a bath contains 7.8 words per C-unit (MLCU = 7.78) across 19 C-units. She opens with a
complex statement that orients the listener to her personal experience with bathing a dog, connects the justification to the narrative task requirement, and offers the promise of humor:

*I’ll tell you about the time we had to give a bath to Piper because of all the sticky dirt. That’s a funny thing.*

Tory makes the distinction that most people enjoy bathing but dogs do not; dogs think differently than people. She established a clear connection between what is happening, why it is happening, and how it is happening; for instance, following the explanation that dogs don’t like baths, Tory relates the difficulty in getting Piper into the bathtub, the dog’s interference by shaking, and the participants’ inability to complete the bath according to reasonable sequence. The narrative events are temporally and spatially linked, terms of psychological causation are mentioned, and a tidy resolution is crafted when Tory says:

*And that’s how to give a dog a bath, but don’t do it in the winter. It was bad, terrible bad. And we were wet.*

This is a fine example of a hybrid script/personal event narrative (PEN) and gives direct evidence of Tory’s skill along the hierarchal sophistication of narrative development. Therefore, I classify this narrative as a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).
Assessment of Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event

Narrative (PEN): PEN #1

Tory’s first personal event narrative is grammatically organized around 24 C-units with an average of 9.6 words (MLCU = 9.62). She begins her story with the early morning departure and clarifies the unusual hour by saying: we had to get up really early in the morning. Actually, it was still night. Later Tory again explains: I already told you that it was still in the night. Tory’s recurring use of nighttime context is an effective tool for establishing this experience as out-of-the-ordinary and unique. Events in Tory’s story are linked temporally, for instance, she states:

*We gave the people, the ones with suits on, we gave them our papers.*

*Then we walked on the airplane.*

She continues by describing the seating, ascent of the plane, eating, and descent. Tory provides evidence of psychological causation by stating:

*My head had a little headache when we went up in the sky, but not so much, because I was really tired.*

This reflection of her internal state is a clear connection between what is happening (ascent), how it is happening (headache), and why it is happening (tired). Tory also fashions symbolic visual representations in a highly descriptive manner; for example, she says:
We went up in the clouds, really, really up so high. We were inside the clouds, and they look like ice cream or something, or maybe like potatoes. You know mashed potatoes.

Tory’s literate language features (LLF), simile and metaphor, offer sophisticated descriptions of clouds as ice cream or mashed potatoes. The final event is the resolution in Tory’s narrative about flying in an airplane. She says: Then, we came down out of the sky and that’s all. This is an appropriate conclusion to a story that is an exemplary Complex Pyramid (Cureton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s first personal event narrative is grammatically organized around 13 C-units with an average of 6.4 words (MLCU = 6.38). She introduces her story by establishing the setting, characters, and clarification for the listener by saying:

*We went there, to Pap and Mimi’s.*

*We played outside a lot.*

*But first, we had to ride there, so far away.*

*Then, we got there.*

Kyleigh’s expands her statement *we had dogs there* by adding: *Everybody brought their dogs.* Her clear articulation signifies the dog experience as out-of-the-ordinary and unique. Events in Kyleigh’s story are connected in temporal fashion, for instance, she states that:

*We slept in sleeping bags or in the beds.*

*Me and Tory and [sister] in our bed.*

*They have lots of beds.*
And [cousin], I think.

Like this many (holding up six fingers) slept in our bed.

Kyleigh identifies what is happening; many people slept in beds. She also makes a distinction between her baby brother and people who slept in beds when she states: Jem was in the crib, because he’s a baby. Her insight demonstrates why events are happening. Kyliegh’s use of connective words is frequent for this short narrative. She uses but first, and then, and creates a clear independent/dependent clause Jem was in the crib, because he’s a baby. Her use of Literate Language Features (LLF) is basic, for instance, she uses lots and a lot but no other adjectives, although Kyleigh does describe Pap and Mimi’s cabin as so far away. Kyliegh’s story is built around a series of related events, and although Kyliegh is the narrator of her own experience, she does not include herself in the story as the protagonist. I believe this is more related to her circular narrating style and not an omission of a traditional narrative component. Still, Kyliegh develops no psychological causation, and so I classify her first personal event narrative as an Intermediate Pyramid (Cureton & Lucas, 2007).

Assessment of Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narrative (PEN): PEN #2

This second personal event narrative by Tory includes an average of 8 words per C-unit (MLCU= 8.0) across 14 C-units. Her description of the hotel is organized in a temporal manner reflecting opening the door with a credit card, pre-payment by grandma, the appearance of the room, and swimming and
napping. Tory closes this narrative with a causal explanation: *But, oh, we took naps when we got there, maybe it was a little later, because we were all so tired.* Although this example is brief, it is well organized, descriptive, and offers features of a fully developed personal event narrative; PEN #2 is classified as a Complex Pyramid (Currenton & Lucas, 2007).

The second personal event narrative example by Kyleigh includes an average of 5.7 words per C-unit (MLCU= 5.71) across 14 C-units. Her description of the characters and setting is organized in a temporal manner; she says:

*Yeah, we hiked and walked.*

*Well, it’s very far and a long way to go.*

*You go by the water.*

The characters are identified as *we*, and Kyleigh is the narrator of the collective. She also includes *you, [aunt and uncle]* as part of the collective *we*. This creates a very interesting moment near the conclusion of the narrative when Kyleigh transitions to the first person stance *I* in *I couldn’t catch him*. She easily steps into the role of the protagonist and finishes her story. Kyleigh’s vocabulary includes a variety of verbs such as: *hiked, walked, go, catching, runned, jump,* and *sunked*. Kyleigh uses consistent descriptive Literate Language Features (LLF) like: *very far, long way, big fish, this long, that big,* and *jump away*. Her visual descriptions are embedded within the temporal and spatial organization of the plot that develops around the frog, dog, and Kyleigh. Actions are provided to demonstrate the characters’ motives. Kyleigh says:
The dog runned and runned for the frog.

Him jump away, jump away.

I couldn’t catch him too.

It sunked.

There was mud, yuck!

Like swish.

Then it was gone.

The motivation for the retreat of the frog is evident; he is being pursued by the dog, but Kyleigh doesn’t offer any internal state words concerning the frog or the dog. She does share her personal internal state when she says: There was mud, yuck! Kyleigh’s second personal event narrative is well organized and developed, and her animated presentation was entertaining. Kyleigh’s use of psychological causation is basic, but character motivation and goals are clear, so I classify this narrative as a Complex Pyramid (Currency & Lucas, 2007).

Assessment of Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narrative (PEN): PEN #3

Tory’s third personal event narrative is grammatically organized around 23 C-units with an average of 8.4 words per C-unit (MLCU = 8.39). She opens her favorite event at Disney narrative with a complex descriptive setting:

There’s little towns, and rides like roller coasters and trees that pretend to talk, and people and kids dressed up in costumes. There was a lot of music, but it was nice.
Tory follows her introduction by stating that she had many favorite activities like princesses, dwarves, and the boat ride through the cave. She then identifies her most favorite experience at Disney: *I think Ellen’s Nightmare was the best thing.* Tory’s progression from favorite to most favorite in this section of her personal event narrative indicates a high level of sophistication in creating a mental setting for the listener. She then continues to orient the listener by crafting this description:

> You have to understand it, because it is a little creepy. There were some *dinosaurs and monsters and like swirly colors things.* You go through it like in a wind-y way and all these different things come to you. They’re right there. It’s supposed to be inside Ellen’s head. It is supposed to be her bad dream.

Using physical images like *dinosaurs* and *monsters,* sensory words like *wind-y way* and *right there,* and mental representations of the bad dream inside Ellen’s head, Tory creates a vivid explanation of a nightmare. It is interesting to examine Tory’s skillful dismantling of this potentially threatening nightmare situation when she says:

> *I don’t like nightmares. I like Ellen. I know her, so – even as it’s scary for me, it’s not. I think it was OK.*

Her use of internal state words like *scary* and *OK,* combined with prior knowledge of Ellen, provides a perfect resolution for Tory’s story. Tory finishes with a fitting conclusion: *I don’t have any more to say about that.* Concise and
rich with emotional knowledge, Tory’s personal event narrative about Ellen’s nightmare is a fine example of a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s third personal event narrative is grammatically organized around 12 C-units with an average of 6 words per C-unit (MLCU = 6.0). She introduces the narrative of her favorite event at Pap and Mimi’s cabin with a simple statement: *We cooked pancakes at breakfast.* Kyleigh’s narrative progresses from pancakes to runny eggs to teeth. Circular in style, she opens with the collective *we* and closes with *I*. The ideas and events are linked temporally and spatially, and Kyleigh crafts rich descriptions of pancakes:

> Like pancakes with blueberries, and syrup, and sometimes chocolate chips.

> Wait, no chocolate chips.

Her reaction to runny eggs is a clear internal state word: *Yuck!* Kyleigh connects her own chewing with Tory’s missing teeth and concludes her narrative with a causal explanation:

> I chewed the food with my teeth.

> There’s first teeth and second teeth.

> Tory has some teeth out.

> She will get some new teeth.

Continuing a successful circular style, Kyleigh presents a clear resolution for the conclusion of her narrative when she says:

> But, but, I don’t have any of them teeth.
Kyleigh final personal event narrative is an example of a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narrative (PEN): PEN #4**

This excellent personal event narrative example by Tory includes an average of 8.5 words per C-unit (MLCU= 8.48) across 25 C-units. Completely unsolicited, Tory volunteered this story during the course of our Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play Interview. Her introduction is a stunning set-up for the listener. She says:

*Hey, you want to know something scary? When I was at the beach, the beach house where we were outside, a wave that was very high came, and it got me a little bit – the ocean did it. I really don’t like swimming in the ocean; it’s so big.*

Tory begins by immediately using an internal state word of high preschool value – *scary* and proceeds to connect the wave, the enormity of the ocean, and her fear. This is a well developed presentation of psychological causation. In clear temporal connection, Tory compares and contrasts the experiences of pool and ocean swimming and then returns the listener to her internal state: *You can see through the water and not get lost like you could in the ocean water. You know – the waves.* Tory concludes her Complex Pyramid narrative (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) with further personal verification by saying:
Yeah, it’s true, because I really, really remember it, and I was very scared. The water would not stop coming at me. I like swimming pools better.

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task #4a: Storytelling with Researcher Prompt**

Tory’s example is grammatically organized around 22 C-units with an average of 8.3 words per C-unit (MLCU= 8.32). Her story contains traditional features of story format such as: *So, there was this little puppy who could really talk.* Her opening is followed by character description like:

*He could fly too, because he was a flying puppy that could talk. His ears flapped for the wings – flap, flap.*

Tory creates rich settings which are presented as: *Paris in an apartment, Pennsylvania,* and *rainbows.* She recognizes that rainbows are typically a fantasy story element and says:

*There’s lots of rainbows in stories, but they’re real too. Like if it rains and it’s sun too, there can be a rainbow, so that part can be real.*

Tory further justifies including rainbows in her story by connecting rainbows to reality. This demonstrates her understanding of pretense and reality; she extends the pretense/reality explanation for the benefit of the listener. As Tory’s story continues, she weaves in complicated events; *robbers, boo-boos,* flying to Pennsylvania, and finding a new *apartment without robbers* are presented in a temporal manner. While she does point out that the puppy has super strengths,
she relies on action, rather than psychological causation, to carry the story. For instance, Tory explains:

*He was sleeping in his apartment with the door all locked up because there was a robber downstairs.*

She tells what is happening and why it is happening, but she does not directly describe how the puppy feels. The lack of internal state words in an otherwise well developed story may be an indication that Tory expects the listener to interpret the psychological causation. After the resolution of escape, *new apartment,* and *picnic,* Tory concludes her story with a conventional variation of ‘they lived happily ever after’ that she phrases as: *so, that’s the end.* Although the thorough progression of events and story elements suggest features of a Complex Pyramid, the absence of psychological causation and internal state words locate the narrative in the Intermediate Pyramid (Currenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s storytelling example is grammatically organized around 15 C-units with an average of 8.1 words per C-unit (MLCU= 8.13). Her story contains traditional features of story format such as: *OK, Pap has a nice cow with wings.* Her introduction is followed by potential character action and the collective *we* as Kyleigh states: *We drive and fly on him.* Kyleigh builds her entire story around the collective *we,* for instance, she uses: *We fly... We would fly, all of us... Pap, Mimi, my mom and all of us... even the kids.* Kyleigh’s strong collective
presentation of the collective *we* is a unique narrative skill. Her ability to integrate the listener and herself as protagonist is evident when she says:

*You went on it, too.*

*Well, I would go there, and, and I could fly on a cow to get there.*

*With helmets, we could fly with helmets on.*

Kyleigh’s progression using *we, you, I, we* throughout her story is novel, sophisticated, and a strong demonstration of her circular narrative style. Kyleigh creates a rich setting that is based on prior knowledge of her cousin’s vacation when she explains: *We fly to Florida like Tory went there,* and she explains that Florida is far away by saying; *it would take a long time to get there.* In the conversational preamble to her storytelling task, Kyleigh demonstrated recognition of typical fantasy story elements; she also distinguished between fantasy and reality. Our conversation follows:

*Pap’s (cows) are not friends. They are mean. But one is nice.*

What would it be like to ride that nice cow if she had wings?

*(laughing) That’s crazy! Cows can’t have wings.*

You are right. Cows can’t have wings, so we’ll have to pretend, ok?

*OK, I do that.*

Kyleigh combines fantasy and reality in her story by connecting flying on a cow with safety measures. Her explanation follows:

*We would fly, all of us – all of us in the seats.*

*Pap, Mimi, my mom and all of us.*
Even the kids could ride on it, and they would be safe.

You went on it too.

Well, I would go there, and, and I could fly on a cow to get there.

With helmets, we could fly with helmets on.

Kyleigh identifies helmets and seats as safety measures and connects them to the ultimate goal: *Even the kids could ride on it, and they would be safe*. This demonstrates her understanding of pretense and reality; she presents the pretense/reality explanation for the benefit of the listener by using explicit language. Kyleigh crafts a clear statement of her internal state during the flight when she says: *I would have to take off my helmet and shake up my head, because it takes a long time to get there*. Although she does not employ typical and expected internal state words, Kyleigh’s psychological causation is clear; an extended time wearing a helmet can cause a headache and fatigue. Her resolution is a clear balance of reality and fantasy as she closes with:

Well, I would go there, and, and I could fly on a cow to get there.

With helmets, we could fly with helmets on.

Kyleigh’s storytelling example is an excellent circular narrative and should be classified as a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

**Narrative Production Task #4b: Story Telling without Researcher Prompt**

Tory produced one story telling without researcher prompt that she based on The Three Little Pigs and her applied story experience from school that
morning. Tory’s story is grammatically well organized, rich in descriptive detail, and reveals psychological causation, but it is an adaptation of a very familiar tale. For this reason, it is not assessed as an original example of storytelling without researcher prompt.

Kyleigh’s self-prompt story example includes an average of 4.9 words per C-unit (MLCU= 4.93) across 29 C-units. Kyleigh does not begin the narrative with a traditional opening, but she clearly introduces her story with a direct invitation to the listener when she says: *Ok. See these little girls?* As the listener, I responded by nodding to Kyleigh.

She immediately establishes the characters by explaining:

*These little girls?*

*They belong to this dad and this mom.*

*Here’s the other dad.*

*Him lives over there.*

Kyleigh’s identification of *the other dad* and his residence indicates a prior knowledge and understanding of family structure. She continues her explanation of family roles later in the narrative when saying:

*The dad, him watching TV.*

*She, the mom, see – hers comes over.*

The events in the story are then linked in a temporal fashion. The children are tucked into bed with a predictable routine of kisses and soothing good night statements, a storm rouses the sleeping children, and the mother enters with
reassurance. Pacified, the children go back to sleep. Kyleigh establishes a firm connection between what is happening in the story (the children’s sleep is interrupted), why it is happening (*boom, boom, a big storm*), and how the children feel about what is happening (*they so scared, waa, waa*). Kyleigh’s narrative ends with a resolution of the problem as the mother comforts the children with her words: *It’s ok honey. Go back to sleep.* The story is brought full circle as:

*And then, them do.*

*Just sleeping now.*

Kyleigh’s use of internal state words *scared* and *waa, waa* represent her understanding of psychological causation. The steady increase in plot tension, significant details about characters, and the conclusive resolution combine to classify Kyleigh’s narrative as a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

**Assessment of Narrative Production Task#5: Story Listening and Extension**

Tory’s extension of “Come Away from the Water, Shirley” is a fine example of a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) and possesses all the features of a sophisticated story. Her story is organized around 22 C-units and including an average of 9.7 words per C-unit (MLCU= 9.68). Tory introduces her story extension by summarizing the story so far:

*...there’s this girl Shirley... She went to the seashore with her mom and dad, but she does her own thing. Nobody knows about it really.*
They just boss her around, her mom does, but Shirley is having some other things to do.

Tory immediately targets the control and distance of the mother and reveals Shirley’s private mental play. The ideas and events Tory describes, like sailing away, digging treasure, and returning to the beach are connected temporally, and Tory also creates connections of psychological causation. For instance, she makes a specific description of Shirley’s mental pretense and imaginary play:

But she does her own thing. Nobody knows about it really. She’s thinking, making up, about pirates and ah, ah playing it.

Tory crafts a compelling observation about the power of the imagination when she explains:

Well, her mom is not really seeing her, because the real Shirley and her dog are on a pirate ship, and they’re sailing really, really fast across the ocean.

She also connects the what, why, and how of events in terms of the mother’s psychological causation in the following:

The mom takes some other little girl – she can’t know her, from the beach home, because she doesn’t even look at Shirley. They get home, and the mom says “Where is Shirley?” Then they all go back to the beach and look across the ocean, and, and here comes Shirley and the dog. They aren’t worried now.
The arrival of Shirley and the dog bringing his friends and all the treasure provides a full resolution. Tory closes with that’s the end of it which should not be mistaken for “happily ever after.” Tory’s extension of “Come Away from the Water, Shirley” should be classified as a Complex Pyramid and an excellent example of psychological causation (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

Kyleigh’s extension of Sophie’s Masterpiece is an exceptional example of a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007) and possesses all the components of a sophisticated story. Her story is organized around 22 C-units and includes an average of 5.7 words per C-unit (MLCU = 5.72). Kyleigh begins her story extension by challenging the landlady’s and captain’s message about Sophie. Kyleigh emphatically states: Her not ugly and disgusting. Her not. Kyleigh counts Sophie’s legs and corrects the total number for her own benefit. Her correction becomes an important detail for the listener too as Sophie later crawls, runs, and hides in Kyleigh’s story extension. As Kyleigh begins her narrative, she points to the final illustration of the young mother and the newborn baby and so creates a transition from the original story to her own story extension. Kyleigh explains:

So, see this mommy and this baby?

Her got her hand on the baby, cause he’s so tiny.

Yeah, him’s new.

I want that baby.

Well, really, the mommy pat the baby.

She goes pat, pat.
Kyleigh identifies the mommy and baby as main characters in her own story extension; by giving them attributes, she also connects the character’s motives and actions. The mommy provides care and nurturing, like patting the baby, because he is *new* and *tiny*. During the descriptive character development, Kyleigh interjects a representation of her own internal state: *I want that baby.* Kyleigh’s use of *I* is also an effective circular narrative style device as she inserts herself into the story. In Kyleigh’s story extension, the spider crawls up the baby’s back and down its neck, causing the baby to cry. Kyleigh says:

> And the baby say, "Waa, waa!"

> He really crying a little right now.

The baby’s physical discomfort is evident in the distress of Kyleigh’s imitation of a baby’s cry. Kyleigh establishes a clear connection between what-why-how in the following resolution:

> The mommy hit the spider down.

> The spider gets hit down the baby’s leg.

> It’s running away.

The baby is rescued and the spider is in retreat, but Kyleigh crafts an additional resolution for her dual plot as she tells:

> It has to get away.

> The mommy will not see it.

> That’s what.

> The spider is hiding now.
Sophie is hiding now.

The baby is safe, the mommy does not see the spider’s escape, therefore Sophie is safely hidden and out of danger. Kyleigh moves the plot forward and links the events temporally by using words like so, well, then, and that’s what. She enhances her story with descriptive words such as ugly, disgusting, tiny, crawled, and really crying.

One of the most striking abilities Kyleigh demonstrates is her representation of the minds of characters. At the beginning of the story, Kyleigh reveals the landlady’s and captain’s internal states and reaction to Sophie; she says: Her not ugly and disgusting. Later, when the baby is in increasing distress, Kyleigh emphasizes:

And the baby say, "Waa, waa!"

He really crying a little right now.

Kyleigh’s understanding of characters’ psychological causation is sophisticated and insightful, and her story extension is an excellent example of a Complex Pyramid (Curenton & Lucas, 2007).

The results of assessment of Narrative Production Tasks #1-5 indicate strong narrative skill for both child-participants. The speech of the child-participants, particularly Tory, included sophisticated receptive vocabulary use in supporting details (Taylor & Carlson, 1997), and excellent interlocutor referents and complex visual imagery (Roby & Kidd, 2008). While Kyleigh demonstrated skill with complex visual imagery and effective interlocutor referents, her syntax
and semantics use reflected a transitional period of language development. Results of this study show the implementation of adverbial phrases, relative clauses, and appropriate conjunction use aligns with research results that indicate mature language and discourse among children with imaginary companions (Bouldin, Bavin, & Pratt, 2002).

Narratives in this study usually followed traditional story schema form with several circular style demonstrations in Kyleigh’s examples. Strong skill for creating setting, character, plot events, and temporal progression was demonstrated. Results show complex plot resolutions and excellent orientation and locator direction for the listener. The results show sophisticated production of internal state words related to emotions, thoughts, and motives that employ both causal explanations and descriptions of characters’ internal states (Curenton & Justice, 2004). These results align with research that reports a strong developmental trend: regarding both the plot and the character’s motives and internal states, 5% of 3-year-old children constructed a narrative that described the character’s consciousness; 56% of 4-year-olds and 67% of 5-year-old children addressed the character’s motives and internal states (Curenton, 2004; see also Curenton & Lucas, 2007). The results of my study, particularly in the area of social-cognitive component or psychological causation, are likely indicative of the developmental trend uniting the actions and consciousness (Bruner, 1986). Results of this study show sophisticated narrative skills in two young children who engage in imaginary companion play.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children include: sophisticated language usage, advanced abstract thought processes like decontextualization increased social-based interaction, and skill in creating and communicating complex mental/linguistic constructions. Results of my research study further connect pretend play and storytelling, indicating a probable cognitive connection between imaginary companion play and children’s narrative skill development. Results further highlight young children’s play as an important mode of narrative skill development and offer evidence of a possible connection between pretend play and narrative occurring by the transition from early childhood to school-age.
Chapter Seven

Conclusions and Implications

Chapter 6 presented the results of the study and analysis of the results; this very thorough discussion was contextualized within the research questions of the study. The purpose of chapter 7 is to provide a brief summary and conclusion of this study. Chapter 7 is composed of the following parts:

- Summary of findings of the study
- Strengths and limitations
- Implications
- Suggestions for future research
- Conclusion

**Summary of Findings of the Study**

This study was a response to the crucial need for research that connects play and literacy and thereby contributes to a better understanding of the play-literacy concept applicable to early childhood education. Centered upon the role of play in the development of cognitive-linguistic skills contributing to literacy, my research study considered both play and literacy to better describe the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play and the possible role of imaginary companion play in the development of young children’s narrative skills. By contextualizing my study within the “play-
literacy nexus,” the narrative skills of young children with imaginary companions were investigated within the context in which young children’s play, language, and emerging literacy behaviors develop and interact.

The central purpose of my investigation was to extend existing research on the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating children’s narrative skills. In this study, children’s imaginary companion play, narrative behaviors, narrative productions, and artistic and dramatic productions were observed, recorded, and analyzed. The goals of this study were: to extend prior research dealing with imaginary companion play; to explore potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills; and extend prior research of the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play.

This study produced important findings that add to the body of knowledge about young children’s imaginary companion play. Both child-participants offered multiple rich, clear descriptions of their imaginary companions and imaginary companion play experiences. Child-participant and parent-participant reports were well aligned and yielded specific information regarding terms and definitions. The child-participant age range for the appearance of imaginary companion play is consistent with previous reports, although their imaginary companion play continues despite participation in formal schooling. Imaginary companion play associated with female gender, like invisible friends requiring care and nurturing, was found, but child-participant #2 demonstrated distinct
dependence behaviors regarding her relationship with two imaginary companions. Findings regarding family structure and type follows long established research as did parental reports that identified pride in their children’s intelligence, creativity, and independent play. Worry about potential lying and graphic death descriptions of imaginary companions were also reported and may signal parental unease about their young child’s fluid understanding of fantasy/reality distinction; however, findings from this study show that children with imaginary companions recognize and successfully navigate fantasy/reality boundaries. For instance, findings reveal that the child-participants could easily distinguish between their real and pretend friends.

Findings of this study also point to children’s friendship, ownership, and imagination as defining features of imaginary companion play. This finding lends support to my premise that friendship, ownership, and imagination are central, defining features of imaginary companion play; as such, they compose a conceptual model of imaginary companion play. Choices in types of imaginative play activities, fantasy predisposition, and fantasy disposition findings show that children with imaginary companions are predisposed to fantasy in their thoughts and interpretations.

Findings from this study contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the narrative skills of young children who engage in imaginary companion play. This study revealed the advanced narrative skills of young children who create imaginary companions. For example, sophisticated language usage, well-
developed abstract thought processes like decontextualization in language, and
skill in creating and communicating complex mental/linguistic constructions were
found. These findings may indicate young children’s increased social-based
interaction with imaginary companions as a positive developmental advantage,
although dialogue with parents and others about imaginary companions could
also be a contributing factor. Successful narratives rely on decontextualized
language, and children in this study shared many stories about their imaginary
companions with their parents, families, and others. All the parents in this study
engaged in shared conversations that included questions about their children’s
imaginary companions, and children were thus encouraged to describe their
imaginary companions by using decontextualized language. Just as abstract and
symbolic thought processes in decontextualized play were required to create and
maintain their imaginary companions, similar abstract and symbolic thought
processes in language were required to produce narratives about young
children’s imaginary companions. It should also be considered that children with
excellent narrative skills may seek an opportunity for their expressions, and
perhaps imaginary companion play is such an outlet.

Finally, findings from this study showcase the young child-participants’
impromptu, spontaneous narratives about their imaginary companion play. This
research phenomenon where imaginative play and narrative skill interacts and
intersects has been authentically captured thereby confirming and advancing
empirical development viewing play and storytelling as complementary
expressions of children’s symbolic imagination (Nicolopoulou, 2007). Additionally, findings from this study invite additional theoretical explanations and empirical development regarding play and storytelling as complementary expressions of children’s symbolic imagination.

Findings concerning the qualities of young children with imaginary companions have been discussed with deep analysis in both chapter 6 and in the above summary. Still, I believe that a young child’s ability to create an invisible other is the most distinct and unique quality of young children with imaginary companions.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths and limitations of this study are important for scholars and researchers to consider. Most importantly, multiple sources of data contributed to the strength and integrity of this research study. Included were child-participant interviews, parent-participant interviews, samples of five different types of narrative productions, artistic and dramatic productions, shared discussions, observations, and anecdotal notes. Using double-checked interviews and resulting accurate data sets enabled me to assemble central assertions and respond to the research questions. Meeting at the inn where both sets of parent-participants are employed provided a naturalistic setting, as did the home of child-participant #2. Both settings were familiar, real-life contexts in which the child-participants were comfortable. My direct observations yielded data that was
context-specific in time and environment. The presence of an accompanying parent at each session lent an assurance of security and familiarity.

By investigating two case studies of young children with imaginary companions and their accompanying parents, I was able to witness the play and stories of two unique individuals. As a researcher, I had a front row vantage point from which to interact with the child-participants, listen to conversations and stories, and observe their imaginary companion and imaginative play demonstrations. My sound child development knowledge and consistent implementation of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) are important strengths of this study. For instance, the number of sessions, length of sessions, activities, materials, and interactions were based on the individual development and needs of each child-participant. By situating the child-participant(s) and researcher as equals, I became a participant myself; this transformation melded our purposes and allowed a deeper, more transparent interpretation of the child-participants and their imaginary companions.

A major strength of my study is seen in the important contributions that my study makes to the literature on imaginary companion play and children’s narrative skills. This study extends significant information on the imaginary companion play of young children by documenting child-participants’ rich descriptions of their imaginary companions and imaginary companion play experiences. This study also offers direct evidence of sophisticated narrative skills of young children who engage in imaginary companion play, including
literate language features, temporal progression, and psychological causation of characters. Most importantly, my study yielded young children’s spontaneous narratives about their imaginary companions; this phenomenon represents a plausible connection between imaginary companion play and young children’s narrative skill development contributing to further theoretical development.

A final strength of this study is the authentic stories of the two child-participants and their parent-participants. Capturing their realities, narratives, and imaginary companion play experiences opens a window into the lives of the young children and their families. By using analysis of narrative, assessment of narrative(s), and a creative narrative stance, I was able to share the human experience of early childhood. In the young voices of Tory and Kyleigh, the reader is privileged to hear first-hand their emotions and experiences. The stories, like the children themselves, are beautiful.

Every study has limitations, and it is beneficial to recognize the limitations of my study. The low sample number in this study should be seen as a limitation. While two case studies provided a feasible researcher project, it also limited the diversity of stories that a greater number of case studies could offer. While the stories presented are rich in detail, two case studies signify a modest investigation. Adding case studies of child-participants from diverse cultural contexts, social class backgrounds, or familial frameworks would offer a more inclusive study. For instance, in a case study where parents were less supportive of imaginary companion play and children’s storytelling, there would be fewer
shared-conversations about the child’ imaginary companion play. This type of case study would help evaluate the generalizability of an important empirical contribution of my study: the connection between imaginary companion play and narrative as evidenced in decontextualized language.

Although I considered the first-cousin relationship of the child-participants as a unique opportunity, other researchers might view their relationship differently. This may also be the case regarding my status as a great-aunt to the child-participants. At the time of the study, I had only met the child-participants as toddlers, and they had no memory of me. As the researcher in this project, my acceptance was eased by the warm welcome of the parents, and some readers may view this with skepticism.

Another limitation of this study was the period of data collection that began in April and concluded in October. Data collection with child-participant #1 totaled twelve weeks, and data collection sessions with child-participant #2 totaled ten weeks. In is possible that a longer investigation could generate more data indicative of the developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for the narrative skills of young children.

The absence of researcher triangulation in the form of an additional interview coder and assessor of narrative(s) is seen as a limitation of this study. Finally, although the tasks prompting narrative productions in this study focused on five task types, additional information provided by vocabulary and
comprehension measures could be beneficial as they are considered components of narrative skill.

**Implications**

This study offers results that have implications for researchers, scholars, and teachers of young children. First, this work demonstrates that imaginary companion play is experienced by children and seen by parents as a typical phenomenon of early childhood. While it is not necessary for parents or teachers to encourage or support children’s imaginary companion play, parents and teachers are encouraged to allow children’s imaginary companion play to proceed.

Results of this study demonstrate a connection between children’s imaginary companion play and their storytelling skills. This finding adds to the existing literature on imaginary companion play and related developmental benefits. This finding also extends our conceptual base of literature regarding the theoretical connection between pretend play and language. Finally, this finding reiterates the value of young children’s play experience as an integral component in their narrative skill development, because narrative skill is an important factor in reading success, academic progress, and life-long communicative competence.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

As an exploratory research study, my project directs researchers and scholars to address the need for additional research in the area of imaginary companion play and young children’s narrative skill development. First, a more
expansive study including a greater population of child-participants and parent-participants could provide broader data in regard to imaginary companion play and young children’s narrative skills. Of particular interest to me would be a larger, more diverse collection of young children’s spontaneous narratives about their imaginary companion play. Also, the inclusion of an artistic production task to accompany Narrative Production Task #5: Picturebook Extension would offer child-participants an additional mode for expressing imaginative thinking.

A second research suggestion is the investigation of types of parent-child storytelling practices and the multiple ways that storytelling practices may affect the imaginary companion play and narrative skills of young children.

Finally, a longitudinal study investigating children’s imaginary companion play and narrative skills is needed to explore possible causal connections and related developmental outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals a strong connection between imaginary companion play and the narrative skills of young children seen in children’s advanced narrative productions across five types of narrative production tasks. This finding is important for the following considerations. First, this finding contributes to our conceptual understanding of imaginary companion play and its developmental benefits. Second, this finding deepens the research literature on the theoretical connection between pretend play and language. Third, this
finding lends value to the general consideration of young children’s play as an integral component of narrative skill development and reading success.
Works Cited


368


Milne, C. (1924). *When we were very young*. New York, NY: Dutton.


Nicolopoulou, A. (2002). Peer-Group culture and narrative development. In S. Blum-Kulka & C. E. Snow (Eds.), *Talking to adults: The contribution of*


Appendices
Appendix A: Narrative Assessment Profile (NAP)

The Narrative Assessment Profile

- **Topic Maintenance:** Are the majority of utterances on topic? No
  - What patterns of digression are evident?

- **Event Sequencing:** Are the majority of events organized in chronological order? No
  - What patterns are evident?

- **Informativeness:** Is enough information presented for the listener to understand the narrative? No
  - What specific information does the listener need to understand the narrative?
With European North American Children and Adults (and adapted to individuals of other cultures)

(McCabe & Bliss, 2003, p.19)
Appendix B: The Story Pyramid Framework

The Story Pyramid Framework

Psychological Structure

Story Structure

Language Structure

(Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p.380)
Appendix C

Recruitment

Recruitment Flyer

Recruitment Phone Script
Recruitment Flyer

YOUNG CHILDREN WITH IMAGINARY COMPANIONS NEEDED

For a research study through The Pennsylvania State University

*Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children*

The purpose of this study is to learn more about imaginary companion play and children’s storytelling skills. Participation Involves:

- Children aged 4-6
- Play with an imaginary companion currently or in the past year
- Imaginary companion can be an invisible person, a toy or stuffed animal treated as real, or an ongoing pretend identity assumed by the child
- 8-10 one-hour sessions over the course of a 4-6 weeks
- Interviews, art and drama expressions, storybook listening and retelling
• Narrative production tasks like “Tell me how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich” or “Tell me a story about a pony with wings”
• Research will be conducted at your convenience

For questions and additional information please contact

Principal Investigator, Suzanne E. Swartz, Ph.D. Candidate
The Pennsylvania State University
College of Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Early Childhood Education 570-764-2399 ses1037@psu.edu

Thank you.
Recruitment Phone Script

Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children

Principal Investigator, Suzanne E. Swartz, Ph.D. Candidate

Phone Script:

Thank you for contacting me and being willing to speak with me today. My name is Suzanne E. Swartz, and I am an advanced doctoral student at The Pennsylvania State University where I am completing my dissertation. I have eighteen years experience in teaching young children and have raised four children of my own.

I am conducting a study for research purposes. Data from this research study will be used in the completion of my doctoral dissertation. My study will explore children’s imaginary companion play and narrative, or storytelling skills. The goals of this study are: to extend prior research dealing with imaginary companion play; to explore potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for young children’s narrative skills; and extend prior research of the narrative skills of young children who participate in imaginary companion play.

My research questions include:
• What is imaginary companion play?
• What are the qualities of young children with imaginary companions?
• What is the connection between pretend play and narrative skills?
• What are the potential developmental benefits of imaginary companion play for narrative skills of young children?

Again, I appreciate your interest in my study and would like to learn a little more about your child and your child’s imaginary companion. Could you tell me about (choose one of the first ten interview questions)? That’s interesting; could you also describe (choose one of the first ten interview questions)?

< This loop will be repeated as necessary.>

The criteria for inclusion as a child-participant in this study are:

• Child aged 4- 6
• Play with an imaginary companion currently or in the past year
• Imaginary companion can be an invisible person, a toy or stuffed animal treated as real, or an ongoing identity assumed by the child
• Accompanying parent of 18 years of age or older
• Willingness to commit to 8-10 one-hour sessions over the course of 4-6 weeks

Screening questions to establish eligibility for child-participant inclusion:

What is the age of your child?

Does your child currently have, or within the past year, an imaginary companion?
What was the form of your child’s imaginary companion: an invisible person; a toy or stuffed animal treated as real; or an ongoing pretend identity assumed by your child?

Are you 18 years of age or older?

Are you willing to commit to 8-10 one-hour sessions over the course of 4-6 weeks?

**Closing for potential participant:**

It sounds like your child and you have an interesting imaginary companion play experience to share. I’d like to meet you together and set up some interview and activity times. My study will include interviewing your child and you about experiences and descriptions of imaginary companion play. I’ll also be asking your child to complete narrative production tasks. Narrative production tasks are storytelling prompts like “Tell me how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich” or “Tell me a story about a pony with wings.” Art activities (like drawing), drama activities (such as talking to a pretend friend on a toy telephone), and storybook listening and retelling will be involved.

These activities can take place in your home or another secure location familiar to your child, at your convenience, during eight-ten one-hour sessions. You will need to be present and may attend the sessions if you wish. Another adult with your pre-approval, like your child’s care giver, may represent you. Each session will be auditory recorded to capture our conversations for later auditory-to-text transcription and analysis. No personal information will be linked
to the recordings which will be stored in a locked safe in my office, and I am the only person who will have access to these recordings. Transcriptions will be kept in a locked, password protected computer file. In the event of future publication of the results of this study, no participant will ever be identified in any publication. There is no obligation or requirement to your child or you beyond our scheduled sessions, and you will receive no compensation for participation in this study. You and your child may refuse to answer any questions and are under no obligation to complete this study. You and/or your child may withdraw from the study at any time.

Do you have any questions about this study or the expectations for your child or you?

<Repeat information loop as necessary.>

Thank you for considering participation in this study. I’d be delighted to meet with you and meet your child. During this initial visit I’ll concentrate on establishing a comfortable relationship with your child, ensuring an understanding of the study, offering your child an opportunity to participate, and gathering informed consent.

Please suggest a convenient time and place which is familiar to your child; I am happy to come to your home if you wish.

Feel free to call or e-mail me with any questions or concerns at 570-764-2399 or ses1037@psu.edu. I look forward to seeing your child, (name) and you (name) at (location) on (date and time). Thank you.
**Closing for non-potential participant:**

The criteria for non-inclusion as a child-participant in this study are:

- Child not aged 4-6
- Play with an imaginary companion is not current or in the past year
- Imaginary companion is not an invisible person, a toy or stuffed animal treated as real, or an ongoing identity assumed by the child
- Accompanying parent is not 18 years of age or older
- Unable to commit to 8-10 one-hour sessions over the course of 4-6 weeks

Thank you for your willingness to share your child’s play experiences and taking the time to discuss my study today. Is there anything else you would mention as we conclude our call? Thank you.
Appendix D

Consent Forms

Assent Form and Script of Potential Child-Participant

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research Conducted through The Pennsylvania State University

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research through The Pennsylvania State University: Alternate Adult and Alternate Location Approval
This informed consent for was reviewed and approved by The Pennsylvania state University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB#42168 Doc. #1003) on 02/11/2013. It will expire on 02/10/2014 (PCF).

Assent Form and Script for Potential Child-Participant

Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children

Principal Investigator, Suzanne E. Swartz, Ph.D. Candidate

Script:

Thanks for meeting with me today. My name is Suzanne Swartz, and I go to Penn State. I’m writing a book about kids’ play and kids’ stories. I need some help from kids to write my book. The kids’ help is called research. Some friends are real, like the friends you go to school with, and some friends are pretend, like the pretend friends you make up. My book is about pretend friends. Your (mom, dad, other) said you have a pretend friend. Is that right?

< This loop will be repeated as necessary. >
I need to find out answers to questions about pretend friends, and I need some kids’ stories too. Some of the stories will be about real things, like making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Some of the stories will be about pretend things, like a pony with wings. I am interested in hearing your stories. I’m wondering if you would like to talk with me about pretend friends and tell stories for my book?

<This loop will be repeated as necessary.>

You and I would get together a couple times a week for a little while to talk about pretend friends and tell stories. Your (mom, dad, other) would be there too. I would ask you some questions about pretend stuff, like being invisible. You could draw some pictures too. I’d ask you to tell a story into a microphone to be recorded so I could write it down later. We would do this about 8 or 10 different times, altogether. What do you think about this idea?

<This loop will be repeated as necessary.>

You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t like. You can stop doing the research with me if you don’t want to do it anymore. Your answers, drawings, and stories would be private too. You get a secret code name in my book.

What questions would you like to ask me?

<Closing for potential child-participant:>

Would you like to help answer my questions and be part of my research?

I think you and I will have a lot of fun talking about pretend friends and telling stories. Thanks.
I acknowledge that my child, ________________________________________,
agreed to participate in the research study *Children, Imaginary Companions, and
Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of
Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children.*

__________________________

__________________________

Third Party Witness Date

__________________________

__________________________

_____  

Principle Researcher Date

*<Closing for non-potential child-participant: >*

Thanks for talking with me today. Is there anything else you would like me to
know before we say goodbye?
This informed consent for was reviewed and approved by The Pennsylvania state University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB#42168 Doc. 1001) on 02/11/2013. It will expire on 02/10/2014 (PCF).

**Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research**

**Conducted through The Pennsylvania State University**

**Title of Project:**

*Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children*

**Principal Investigator:**

Suzanne E. Swartz, M.S. Ed., Ph.D. Candidate

The Pennsylvania State University

College of Education

Curriculum and Instruction

Early Childhood Education

**Principal Investigator Contact Information:**

Suzanne E. Swartz

552 John Brady Dr

Pennsdale, PA 17756

570-764-2399

ses1037@psu.edu
Advisor: Dr. James E. Johnson
Professor of Education, PIC-ECE
The Pennsylvania State University
147 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16802
814-865-2230

Purpose of the Study: This study is being conducted for research purposes through The Pennsylvania State University. Data from this study will be used in the completion of a doctoral dissertation. The central purpose of this study is to explore the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating children’s narrative, or storytelling, skills. This study will allow the descriptions of imaginary companion play, narrative behaviors, and narrative productions of young children to be observed, recorded, and assessed.

Procedures to be Followed: The child participant will be asked to complete an interview about imaginary companion play experiences, participate in narrative production tasks, storybook listening and retelling, and art and drama activities. The parent will be asked to complete an interview about their child’s imaginary companion play experiences. The parent, or an adult pre-approved by the parent, like the child’s care giver, must be present at all child-participant data collection sessions. All sessions will be auditory recorded.
**Discomfort and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life.

**Benefits:** The benefits to parent-participants include a better understanding of imaginative play, specifically imaginary companion play. The benefits to child-participants include an opportunity to describe imaginary companion play experiences and create original stories. The benefits to society include a better understanding of young children’s imaginary companion play and its potential developmental for narrative, or storytelling, skills.

**Duration:** Interviews, narrative production tasks, storybook listening and retelling, and art and drama activities will conducted in a time format developmentally appropriate and comfortable for the child participant. Each session will take approximately 1 hour. In all, 8-10 sessions will be required over the course of 4-6 weeks.

**Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research project is completely confidential, and all information will be kept private. Your child’s name, and your name, will not appear on any documents. Auditory recordings and original drawings will be stored in a locked safe in the researcher’s office; only the researcher will have access to the safe, drawings, and recordings. Original drawings and recordings will be destroyed by the year 2018. Transcriptions, archived drawings, and summaries will be kept in a locked, password protected computer file; only the researcher and the researcher’s advisor will have access to transcriptions, archived drawings, and summaries.
Possible future publication or presentation drawn from this research will not contain any personal or identifiable information. The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study.

**Right to Request Information and Ask Questions:** Please contact Suzanne E. Swartz at 570-764-2399 or ses1037@psu.edu at any time with questions about the study. You can also call this number if you feel that the research study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, or problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at 814-865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the researcher.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your child’s decision and your decision to participate in this study are completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. You may withdraw from this study at any time. Refusal to take part in or withdraw from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

Your child must aged 4-6 years old to participate in this study; parents and caregivers must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.
I give my permission for my child, __________________________________, to participate in this study, *Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children*

_____________________________________

_______________________

Parent Signature Date

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign your name and date below. A copy of this form will be provided for your records and future reference.

_____________________________________

_______________________

Parent Participant Signature Date

_____________________________________

_______________________

Person Obtaining Consent Date
This informed consent for was reviewed and approved by The Pennsylvania state University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB#42168 Doc. #1002) on 02/11/2013. It will expire on 02/10/2014 (PCF).

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research through The Pennsylvania State University: Alternate Adult and Alternate Location Approval

Title of Project:

Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children

Principal Investigator:

Suzanne E. Swartz, M.S. Ed., Ph.D. Candidate

The Pennsylvania State University
College of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
Early Childhood Education

Principal Investigator Contact Information:

Suzanne E. Swartz
552 John Brady Dr
Pennsdale, PA 17756
Advisor: Dr. James E. Johnson
Professor of Education, PIC-ECE
The Pennsylvania State University
147 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16802
814-865-2230

Purpose of the Study: This study is being conducted for research purposes through The Pennsylvania State University. Data from this study will be used in the completion of a doctoral dissertation. The central purpose of this study is to explore the language skills of young children with imaginary companions by investigating children’s narrative, or storytelling, skills. This study will allow the descriptions of imaginary companion play, narrative behaviors, and narrative productions of young children to be observed, recorded, and assessed.

Procedures to be Followed: The child participant will be asked to complete an interview about imaginary companion play experiences, participate in narrative production tasks, storybook listening and retelling, and art and drama activities. The parent will be asked to complete an interview about their child’s imaginary
companion play experiences. The parent, or an adult pre-approved by the parent, like the child’s care giver, must be present at all child-participant data collection sessions. All sessions will be auditory recorded.

**Discomfort and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life.

**Benefits:** The benefits to parent-participants include a better understanding of imaginative play, specifically imaginary companion play. The benefits to child-participants include an opportunity to describe imaginary companion play experiences and create original stories. The benefits to society include a better understanding of young children’s imaginary companion play and its potential developmental for narrative, or storytelling, skills.

**Duration:** Interviews, narrative production tasks, storybook listening and retelling, and art and drama activities will conducted in a time format developmentally appropriate and comfortable for the child participant. Each session will take approximately 1 hour. In all, 8-10 sessions will be required over the course of 4-6 weeks.

**Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research project is completely confidential, and all information will be kept private. Your child’s name, and your name, will not appear on any documents. Auditory recordings and original drawings will be stored in a locked safe in the researcher’s office; only the researcher will have access to the safe, drawings, and recordings. Original drawings and recordings will be destroyed by the year 2018.
Transcriptions, archived drawings, and summaries will be kept in a locked, password protected computer file; only the researcher and the researcher’s advisor will have access to transcriptions, archived drawings, and summaries. Possible future publication or presentation drawn from this research will not contain any personal or identifiable information. The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study.

**Right to Request Information and Ask Questions:** Please contact Suzanne E. Swartz at 570-764-2399 or ses1037@psu.edu at any time with questions about the study. You can also call this number if you feel that the research study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, or problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at 814-865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the researcher.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your child’s decision and your decision to participate in this study are completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. You may withdraw from this study at any time. Refusal to take part in or withdraw from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.
**Parent Pre-approved Alternate Adult and Alternate Location:** Parents may choose to have an alternate pre-approved adult, such as the child’s caregiver, represent them at child-participant data collection sessions. Parents may also choose to have child-participant data collection sessions take place at the child care center or early schooling location where the child participant is enrolled; this requires full approval by the site director, caregiver, and/or teacher. Parents, caregivers, and site personnel directly involved must be 18 years of age or older.

Completion of this form implies that you have read the information and give consent for a specified alternate adult and/or specified site to supervise your child during this research project in your place on your child’s behalf. If you choose to make these alternate adult and site arrangements for this study, please sign your name and date below. Approval is contingent upon alternate adult and site agreement and approval(s). A copy of this form will be provided for your records and future reference.

I give permission for my child, ________________________________________, to participate in this research study, *Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children* while under the alternate adult supervision of
______________________________ during my absence.

______________________________
Parent Participant Signature       Date

______________________________
Alternate Adult Signature         Date

______________________________
Alternate Site Signature (if applicable) Date

______________________________
Name and Address of Site

______________________________
Person Obtaining Consent           Date
Appendix E

Data Collection

Interview Scripts

Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play

Interview: Script for Parent-Participant

Imaginary Companion Play and Imaginative Play

Interview: Script for Child-Participant
Imaginary Companion and Imaginary Play Interview:

Script for Parent Participant

Title of Project:

*Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children*

Principal Investigator:

Suzanne E. Swartz, M.S. Ed., Ph.D. Candidate
The Pennsylvania State University
College of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
Early Childhood Education

Script

An imaginary companion or pretend friend is a very vivid imaginary character (or person, or animal) with which a child interacts during his or her play and daily activities. Sometimes the imaginary companion is completely invisible; sometimes the imaginary companion takes the form of a stuffed animal, doll, or other toy. And sometimes, the child will impersonate a character to the point that it seems to be the child’s identity. Does your child have an imaginary companion currently or in the past?

What is the name of your child’s imaginary companion (IC)?
Describe the IC.

<Ask questions which build on the information provided by the parent, like- gender, appearance, etc.>

Where does the IC live, sleep?

What family routines does the IC participate in, such as- Do you buckle the IC into the care or set a place at the table for the IC?

Describe the personality of the IC.

Have you ever witnessed your child playing with the IC? What did you see?

Who else knows about the IC?

Have other people discussed your child’s imaginary companion with you? What do you remember about their impressions of your child’s imaginary companion play?

What has your child told you or other family members about the IC?

Has your child ever blamed the IC for something naughty?

What characteristics do you think your child demonstrates by creating an IC?

How do you feel about your child having an IC?

<Ask questions which build on the information provided by the parent, like- questions about friendship, imagination, and ownership.>

Tell me about your child’s real friends.

What are your child’s favorite books or movies?

What kinds of art, music, or sports activities does your child participate in?
Describe the other kinds of pretend or imaginary play your child engages in. Is this shared by other children, or does your child play this mostly alone? How would you describe your child’s narrative, or storytelling, skills? What is a recent story your child told to you?

Do you tell stories to your child? If so, briefly retell a recent story example. What are some examples of activities or events, typical or special, which your child has engaged in within the past month? For example, has your child made a snowman or visited a relative?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your child?
Title of Project:

*Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children*

Principal Investigator:

Suzanne E. Swartz, M.S. Ed., Ph.D. Candidate

The Pennsylvania State University

College of Education

Curriculum and Instruction

Early Childhood Education

Script for Imaginary Companion Interview

First, I’m going to ask you some questions about friends. Some friends are real like the kids who live on your street, the ones you play with. And some friends are pretend friends. Pretend friends are ones that are make-believe, that you pretend are real. Do you have a pretend friend? Have you ever had a pretend friend before, in the past?

What is your pretend friend’s (IC) name?

<Use the IC name provided by the child in place of IC throughout the script.>
Tell me what your pretend friend (IC) looks like.

<Ask questions which facilitate identification of characteristics like appearance, gender, type- using information provided by the child.>

Where does your IC live?

<Ask questions about the life of the IC like sleeping, eating, riding in the care- using information provided by the child.>

Does your IC talk or sing? What does your IC sound like?

Tell me about the first time your IC came to play.

What kinds of games do you and your IC like to play?

What do you like the most about your IC?

Is there anything you don’t like about your IC?

If you and your IC were having a bike race, who would win?

Is your IC ever naughty? If so, in what way is your IC naughty?

If you or your IC was going to do something naughty, who would do it? Would you do it, or would your IC?

Who sees your IC?

Who does your IC play with most? Does your IC ever play with other friends? If so, who?

Do you talk to other people about your IC?

What do you think other people know about your IC?

How much of the time is your IC with you? Are there ever times your IC is not with you?
If you do something else, what does your IC do?
What does your IC do when you are asleep?
Does your IC have a family or friends?
Do you and your IC read books together? What books are your favorites?
Do you and your IC tell stories?
What is the last story you told your IC?
What is the best story your IC has told you?
Do you have other IC’s? Tell me about them.

<Ask questions which follow the script above, using information provided by the child to interview about additional imaginary companions. Additionally, ask: >

Do you still play with these IC’s? If not, who stopped playing? How did that happen?
Is there anything else you would like me to know about your imaginary companion(s)?

**Script for Imaginative Play Interview**

Do you play pretend games when you are by yourself? What kind?
Do you like to play pretend games with other people? What kind?
Do you keep on playing when it’s busy in the room or even if your mom is talking to you?
When you play pretend games, do you feel like you can really see the pretend people and places?
What do you daydream about?

Do you ever daydream about flying or being very strong or brave?

What do you think about when you are almost asleep?

Have you ever pretended to be an animal or a thing like a spaceship or a superhero? Tell me about it.

What do you think about when you are waiting in line, like at the grocery store?

Do you ever make up pretend ideas about people you see but don’t really know?

Have you ever had a scary dream at night that seemed so real you thought it was really happening? Tell me about a scary dream you had.

Have you ever wondered how clouds get in the sky or how fish can be in the water and not get all wrinkly? What things do you wonder about?
Appendix F

Data Collection

Narrative Production Tasks #1-5

Artistic and Dramatic Production Tasks
Title of Project:

Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children

Principal Investigator:

Suzanne E. Swartz, M.S. Ed., Ph.D. Candidate
The Pennsylvania State University
College of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
Early Childhood Education

Narrative Production Task#1: Story Listening, Comprehension, and Retelling

Choose a picturebook developmentally appropriate for the child, such as Snow Bear, by J. C. George (paintings by W. Minor, New York: Scholastic Inc, 2000) and read it orally to the child participant. Allow the child to comment during reading but keep researcher comments non-committal. Following the conclusion, ask the child to retell the story beginning with the front cover. The researcher may offer two prompts per page; these prompts must be non-specific such as “Cool” or “Now what’s going on?” Researcher prompts must avoid any elaborations of the specific text. If the child does not continue
the retelling on the targeted page following the second researcher prompt, turn to the next picturebook page and allow the child to continue with the retelling.

**Narrative Production Task #2: Script Narrative**

Choose a recurrent activity with which the child has a high degree of familiarity, such as going to the dentist, shopping for groceries, or playing a game of tag. Offer a prompt, such as “Do you go shopping for groceries? Tell me everything that happens when you go shopping for groceries.”

Conduct two more script narrative production samples. Additional script narrative prompts could include topics like: making the bed; feeding a pet; packing a backpack for school, or making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Researcher choices of script narrative task productions are highly variable and dependent upon each child-participant’s case.

**Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narrative (PEN)**

The parent-participant will have previously (during the Parent-Participant Imaginary Companion Play Interview) identified recent events with which the child will be familiar. For example, perhaps the parent indicated that the child recently went on a train ride at the county fair. As a prompt, offer, “Your mom told me you went on a train ride at the fair. Tell me everything about your train ride.”

Conduct two more personal event narrative production samples using prompts based upon information provided by the parent-participant in the Parent-Participant Imaginary Companion Play Interview.
Narrative Production Task #4a: Story Telling with Researcher Prompt

Offer a storytelling prompt to the child, such as “Tell me a story about a pony with wings.”

Conduct two more storytelling with researcher prompt narrative production samples. Additional storytelling prompts could include: tell me a story about shoes that can talk; tell me a story about building a house made of clouds; or tell me a story about a lonely dinosaur. Researcher choices of storytelling with researcher prompt narrative task productions are highly variable and dependent upon each child-participant’s case.

Narrative Production Task #4b: Story Telling without Researcher Prompt

Provide the opportunity for the child to create a story with a self-prompt. Ask, “Would you like to tell me a story all your own? What story would you like to tell me?”

Conduct two more storytelling without researcher prompt narrative production samples. If the child is unable to generate a self-prompt or chooses not to offer a story, thank the child for thinking about stories and move on to another task or activity, as appropriate.

Narrative Production Task #5: Story Listening and Extension

Choose a picturebook developmentally appropriate to the child such as *Come Away from the Water, Shirley*, by J. Burningham (New York: Red Fox Publishers, 2004), and read it orally to the child-participant. Allow the child to
comment during the reading, but keep researcher comments non-committal. Following the conclusion, ask the child to extend the story. Offer the following prompt: “If this story kept going, what do you think would happen? Tell me the story that comes after this.”

**Narrative Production Task Schedule:**

Narrative Production Task #1: Story Listening, Comprehension, and Retelling and Narrative Production Task #5: Story Listening and Extension are each provided once during data collection, resulting in one Task #1 child-participant sample and one Task #5 child-participant sample. Narrative Tasks #1 and 5 are lengthier productions; this directive follows established research designs.

Narrative Production Task #2: Script Narrative; Narrative Production Task #3: Personal Event Narrative (PEN); Narrative Production Task #4a: Story Telling with Researcher Prompt; and Narrative Production Task #4b: Story Telling without Researcher Prompt require three child-participant samples for each narrative production task. Narrative Tasks #2, 3, 4a, and 4b are brief productions; this directive follows established research designs.

Narrative Task Productions #1-5 are arranged in increasing skill complexity.
All tasks, interactions, and dialogue must be conducted with full researcher awareness and implementation of developmentally appropriate choices. The child-participant’s welfare is the top priority at all times.
Artistic and Dramatic Task Production: Script for Child Participant

**Title of Project:**

*Children, Imaginary Companions, and Narrative Skills: Case Studies of the Potential Developmental Benefits of Imaginary Companion Play for the Narrative Skills of Young Children*

**Principal Investigator:**

Suzanne E. Swartz, M.S. Ed., Ph.D. Candidate

The Pennsylvania State University

College of Education

Curriculum and Instruction

Early Childhood Education

**Artistic Expression Production Task:**

During the Imaginary Companion and Imaginative Play Interview and Narrative Production Tasks, offer the child-participant several opportunities for artistic expression. These may include drawing a picture of: the imaginary companion(s); play sessions with the imaginary companion; play with real friends or siblings; where the imaginary companion lives; the family and/or friends of the imaginary companion, etc... The researcher should aim to build from information provided by the child-participant during the interview(s) or discussions. For example, the researcher might say, “You said your imaginary
companion lives on a boat in your swimming pool. Please draw a picture of where your imaginary companion lives.” Or perhaps, if the child-participant has not provided information, the researcher might say, “We haven’t talked about where your imaginary companion lives. Could you please draw a picture of where your imaginary companion lives?” The researcher and child can also together choose artistic expression opportunities which reflect the child-participant’s interests. For example: if the child-participant tells stories about the imaginary companion and monsters, perhaps a series of child-participant drawings could accompany the story.

**Dramatic Expression Production Task:**

Offer the child-participant opportunities to share dramatic expressions which extend and enrich the narrative task productions. For example, following a story retelling, storytelling production, and /or story extension task, perhaps the child-participant would like to call the imaginary companion on a toy telephone and share the story.

Artistic dramatic expression tasks require increasing comfort and trust with the researcher. All tasks, interactions, and dialogue must be conducted with full researcher awareness and implementation of developmentally appropriate choices. The child-participant’s welfare is the top priority at all times.
Appendix J

Data Analysis: Assessment of Narratives

Deletion Guidelines and Procedures

C-Unit Segmenting Rules

Descriptions and Examples of Literate Language Features

The Story Pyramid Framework with Levels
Deletion Guidelines and Procedures

All transcripts are presented in their original auditory-to-text transcriptions. For assessment purposes, modifications were made. They included:

1. Child-participant statements related to the narrative production were included. Irrelevant remarks were not included, such as “Our tea is ready.”
2. Researcher remarks and statements were not included.
3. Child-participant responses to standard researcher narrative probes were included; for example child-participant responses to “What is happening?” were included.
4. Utterance-embedded repetitions, such as “My butterfly went, my butterfly, high in the sky” were deleted.
5. Single word repetitions were deleted; for example, “ah,” “mm,” and “uh-huh” were deleted.
6. False starts, clarifications, and restatements were deleted. For example, “Birds, my tiny birds,” “Didi, and I said Didi,” and “Nile was in an accident, because Niles was in an accident.”
7. Child-participant responses which were unclear or unintelligible were deleted.
8. Book-talk and clarifications about directions were not included in assessments.

(Based on a model by Curenton & Lucas, 2007; See also Curenton & Justice, 2004)
C-Unit Segmenting Rules

Definition of C-Units

1. A C-unit can be (a) and independent clause (“Joey looked in the closet”); (b) and independent clause and its dependent clause (“Joey looked in the closet because he thought his shoes were in there).
2. A C-unit can be grammatically correct according to Standard American English and/or African American English.
3. Statements that do not adhere to a subject-verb clausal structure can be defined as a C-unit if (a) it is part of dialogue (e.g., “My shoes!”); (b) it is a response to a question.
4. Infinitives (Joey wanted to find his shoes), gerunds (Joey remembered seeing them in the closet), or participles (Joey saw his brother wearing them yesterday) are not counted as separate C-units.

Segmenting C-Units

1. C-units are segmented at coordinating conjunctions.
2. C-units are segmented at conjunctive adverbs (also, besides, however, rather, so, that, then).
3. C-units in dialogue are segmented as follows:
   a. First independent clause and dependent clause in one C-unit
   b. Any subsequent independent and dependent clauses are counted as separate C-units (James said, I don’t like what you’re doing [1 C-unit], and I want my mom [1 C-unit])

   (Currenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 430)
Descriptions and Examples of Literate Language Features

1. **Conjunctions**: Conjunctions are used in discourse to organize information and clarify relationships among elements. They can be categorized as either coordinating or subordinating. Coordinating conjunctions include and, for, or, yet, but, nor, and so. Subordinating conjunctions are more numerous, and include the following examples: after, although, as, because, for, if, how, since, still, that, though, unless, when, where, while, and why.

2. **Elaborated Noun Phrases**: An elaborated noun phrase is a group of words comprising a noun at its head and one or more modifiers providing additional information about the noun. Modifiers may include articles (e.g., a, an, the), possessives (e.g., every, each, some), demonstratives (e.g., this, that, those), quantifiers (e.g., every, each, some), wh-words (e.g., what, which, whichever), and true adjectives (e.g., tall, long, ugly). Examples of elaborated noun phrases include my dog (possessive + noun), the big tree (article + adjective+ noun), and some mean boys (quantifier+ adjective+ noun).
   a. **Simple Elaborated Noun Phrase**: Simple phrases consist of a single modifier and a noun. Examples include big doggy (adjective+ noun), that girl (determiner+ noun), and those ones (demonstrative+ noun).
   b. **Complex Elaborated Noun Phrase**: Complex phrases consist of two or more modifiers and a noun. Examples include big red house (adjective+ adjective+ noun), a tall tree (article+ adjective+ noun), and some mean boys (quantifier+ adjective+ noun).

3. **Mental and Linguistic Verbs**: This relatively small group of verbs refers to various acts of thinking and speaking. Mental verbs include think, know, believe, imagine, feel, consider, suppose, decide, forget, and remember. Linguistic verbs include say, tell, speak, shout, answer, call, reply, and yell.

4. **Adverbs**: Adverbs are particular syntactic forms that are used to modify verbs. These modifiers increase the explicitness of action and event descriptions. Adverbs provide additional information about time (e.g., suddenly, again, now), manner, (e.g., somehow, well, slowly), degree (e.g., almost, barely, much), place (here, outside, above), reason (therefore, since, so), and affirmation or negation (e.g., definitely, really, never). (Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 431-432)
### The Story Pyramid Framework

#### Levels of Story Pyramids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Pyramid Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **No Foundation**   | *Narrative is not based on C-units*  
*Ideas/events are one-word descriptions of objects/activities*  
*Unrelated temporally, spatially, or in terms of psychological causation*  
*Child does not demonstrate concept of a story*                                                                                                                       | A boy  
Bicycle  
Flowers  
A flower                                                                                                               |
| **Basic Pyramid**   | *Narrative is based on C-units*  
*Ideas/events not linked temporally or spatially*  
*Description of unrelated events/ideas*  
*No mention of characters’ motives, goals, or internal states*                                                                                                           | She look at her baby  
Then the train did  
The baby did  
She see a train  
The baby cry  
The floor wet                                                                                             |
| **Intermediate Pyramid** | *Narrative is based on C-units*  
*Ideas/events are linked temporally or spatially*  
*Ideas/events not framed in context of characters’ motives, goals, & internal states*  
*Clear articulation of what is happening in the story*  
*No articulation of why events are happening*                                                                                                                          | I guess he in his fort  
He put a hat on his head  
That’s my brother  
And that’s my little sister  
He trying to catch a ball  
He running to it  
Now he upset  
He in the water                                                                                                  |
| **Complex Pyramid** | *Narrative is based on C-units*  
*Ideas/events are linked temporally, spatially, & in terms of psychological causation*  
*Characters’ motives, goals, & internal states are mentioned*  
*Clear connection of what/why/how*                                                                                                                                       | The dog is asleep  
The cat is coming up  
The dog is still asleep  
He doesn’t hear the cat  
The cat eats the dog’s treats  
Now the dog is sad                                                                                                     |

(Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 405-408) (Note: Examples are researcher created)
The Vita of Suzanne E. Swartz, 552 John Brady Dr., Pennsdale, PA 17756, E-mail: ses1037@psu.edu

EDUCATION
Ph.D. in Education, The Pennsylvania State University
Scheduled degree completion
Curriculum and Instruction
Early Childhood Education
Concentration- Children’s Literature
M.S. in Early Childhood Education, Bloomsburg University
1993
B.S. in Elementary Education, Bloomsburg University
1977

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT
The Pennsylvania State University
Harrisburg, PA
College of Behavioral Sciences and Education
Lecturer, EDUC 421 Children’s Literature
Fall 2013

The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA
College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Researcher and Contributing Author
2010

PUBLICATIONS


CURRENT RESEARCH
*Swartz, S. E. Identity Crisis in Institutes of Higher Education: Redefining Professional Identity for ECE Teacher Educators (Pre K and Pre K-3rd Reform, Shifting Teacher Certification Bands, ECE TE Programs, and Implications for Teacher Educators). (Document in progress), University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.


CONFERENCE AND INVITED SPEAKER PRESENTATIONS


*Swartz, S. E. “Imaginary Companions and Young Children’s Narrative Competence.” Syracuse University and The Pennsylvania State University Collaborative Conference, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, April, 2012. Conference Speaker.