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PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM DURING LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN
KINDERGARTEN

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Education.

Hamline University
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To my mom and dad for always believing in me, my colleagues for pushing me to be the best me, and my boyfriend for your continuous support and love. A special thank you to my Capstone Committee for your time, dedication and support. I couldn't have done any of this without you.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Research Question

My research question of “*How does a play-based curriculum during literacy instruction in a kindergarten classroom promote growth in students' early literacy skills such as alphabets, fluency and reading comprehension?*” has a long and personal history. I feel as though my passion for this topic has been evolving for many years now. In this chapter, I will discuss how I have come to my connection with play-based learning, the overview and purpose of this capstone, as well as why and who this topic is important to. I have always been interested in play-based learning and I am eager to share why.

Play-Based Learning Journey

My interest in play-based learning has always been present. With my experience teaching preschool and throughout college, I knew the importance of play for our early scholars. However, I would say that I did not become 100% interested in the topic until I took my kindergarten teaching job four years ago.

When I was student teaching in a first grade classroom, the classroom where I was in had almost zero toys, no dramatic play area and also no time allotted in the day for

play. I started researching if this was the normal in our public schools, and realized that there was a gap between the way that research says students learn best, and what was actually being done in our classrooms. I was hopeful to find a school where I could teach that had a play-based curriculum for their young scholars.

The school where I was hired used a play-based learning approach in kindergarten, so of course, I had no choice but to become knowledgeable on the topic. I was amazed at how smooth and how well the play-based learning worked in the kindergarten classroom. At first, I did a lot of learning and observations through my co-workers who had been using this approach for many years. The longer I worked in kindergarten using play-based learning, the more convinced I was that this was the best way for students to learn.

I started taking classes for my Master's degree here at Hamline University, and through these courses, I started writing papers and making projects on play-based learning. The more that I learned through research, again the more convinced I was that this is truly the best way for our youngest students to learn. It is one thing to think something, but then to begin digging into research that supports your ideas is another. While I was doing this research and completing these assignments my capstone idea fell into place.

Overview and The Purpose of this Capstone

When I first started thinking about how I would develop a capstone project for play-based learning, I knew that I had to first narrow it down to one subject area. It was a hard choice for me to choose between reading and literacy as I have seen huge success in

both subjects using play-based learning. I ultimately decided on literacy, in which I had to narrow it down to specific literacy skills. The early literacy skills that I chose for this project include alphabets, fluency, and reading comprehension.

The purpose of this capstone is to develop a week-long literacy curriculum that can be used in a kindergarten classroom. The curriculum will focus on the three early literacy skills listed above. There will be an hour of play-based learning instruction for 1 hour a day, five days a week. At the end of each week, there will be an assessment to determine if the students have grown in the desired learning goals. Eventually, my hope is to develop the curriculum into a year-long curriculum that can be used in literacy in a kindergarten classroom.

From the assessment data that is collected during the course of this project, I hope to then use this information to educate others including administration, parents as well as other teachers on how a play-based learning approach in the classroom can help students meet desired literacy goals.

Significance For Stakeholders

The topic of this capstone project is important to many people. This project has significance for teachers, administration, parents, and students. While it is important for all of these groups, the why of how it is important is different.

It is important for educators, specifically those in early elementary to be educated on the topic of play-based learning. As teachers, it is our job to use best practices to teach

our students. Once teachers are educated on this topic, they can then use this research to develop and implement play-based learning in their classrooms as well.

I believe that one of the most important groups of people to educate on this topic is our administrators. In my research, there are many teachers who don't include play into their classrooms because they are afraid of the ramifications. They describe how when administration hears the word play, they don't associate that word with learning. If we educate our administration on how play-based learning can promote growth in academics, as well as social/emotional skills I believe that they would be more apt to allow teachers to include play in their classrooms.

Parents need to be educated on the topic as well, as it is very important that they understand how it can benefit their children. In my experience, one of the big draws for some parents to my school is that we are play-based. However, you also have the flip-side where parents hear the word play, and they don't believe that academics will be of importance. I want parents to be educated on play-based learning and understand that children are learning while they are playing. It is not playing or learning, it is playing and learning.

Another important stakeholder in my research question is the field of education as a whole. The more that this question and topic is researched, the better it will be for the field of education. I believe that the more we educate and the more that we know, the better we can prepare our future teachers to use such a learning style in their classrooms. I plan to convince all of these stakeholders by providing them not only with the research

that I discuss in my literature review, but also with the use of the curriculum that I create for my project.

Finally, the most important stakeholder of all is the children. The reason that this capstone project is even being developed is for the students. All of our kindergarten students deserve the best education possible. They deserve to have an education that develops their social, emotional and academic learning. I believe that it is easy to say that all any teacher really wants for their students is for them to succeed. As teachers, it is our job to do what is best for our learners.

Summary

Chapter one discusses how I came to be interested in play-based learning and why it is important to me. It also talks about the development of my project and why this project matters to parents, teachers, students, and administrators. I truly believe that there is a gap between how our primary classrooms are set up today and the curriculum that we use compared to best practices of how our youngest students learn.

Chapter two will review the literature that supports my development of this capstone project. Chapter three will discuss the development of my project as well as the details of the project. Chapter four will discuss the conclusion of my project and what I have learned while creating it.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discover if a play-based learning literacy curriculum in a kindergarten classroom promotes growth in student's early literacy skills. The purpose of my research is to examine the use of play-based curriculum during literacy instruction time in a kindergarten classroom and how it impacts students' early literacy growth. This research relates to my research question: *How does a play-based curriculum during literacy instruction in a kindergarten classroom promote growth in students' early literacy skills such as alphabets, fluency and reading comprehension?*

Chapter two will inform and reflect on expert voices on the important topics of my research study. These topics include play-based curriculum, literacy instruction, early literacy skills and teachers perceptions towards play-based learning. Play-based learning/curriculum can have many definitions and this chapter will discuss the working definition for the purpose of this paper and project. Literacy instruction can look different in different classrooms and grade levels and this chapter will share some different ways

that play-based learning can be incorporated into the kindergarten literacy block. It is also important to understand what early literacy skills will be addressed in this project as well as what teachers feel are roadblocks to incorporating play based learning into their classrooms. It is important to understand these topics and how they all work together to form the research question.

Understanding play-based curriculum is essential for understanding this study. It is important for parents, educators and administrators to understand what play-based curriculum is and how it can be used in our classrooms. I chose to review and use sources that incorporated a play-based curriculum in both preschool and kindergarten classrooms. It was important to review literature that was consistent with the age group in my classroom where the research study would take place.

For the purpose of this project, it is important to understand what is included in literacy instruction. The sources that were used for this study are all in a primary grade classroom which was important to mesh with the classroom that I currently teach in. Literacy instruction time can look different in different classrooms, this chapter will lay out a framework for how literacy instruction can look in a kindergarten classroom. It is important to understand the framework in order to grasp how play-based curriculum is used during this instruction time.

It is also essential that early literacy skills in children are understood for the purpose of this research study. Early literacy skills can be defined and may look many different ways in a classroom. For the purpose of this study I reviewed and analyzed research on the five following early literacy skills categories: alphabetics, fluency, and

reading comprehension. Understanding of these early literacy skills is needed in order to understand the correlation that play-based literacy instruction can have on a student's early growth in literacy skills.

Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning or PBL is child-centered or directed, and focuses on the development of a child's academic, social and emotional skills through developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that are based on a child's interest and abilities (Taylor, Boyer 2020). An important aspect of play-based learning is that children have some freedom in the way they choose to learn (Keung & Cheung, 1997). Play-based learning has been a part of my kindergarten classroom ever since I started teaching kindergarten 4 years ago. Play-based learning is incorporated all throughout our day in all academic subject areas. In recent times, research has shown an increase in the benefits that learning through play has in the classroom, however, the amount of play specifically in kindergarten classrooms remains on a downward slope (Lynch, 2015). A large reason that we have seen a decrease in play in the kindergarten classroom is due to the increased focus on academics. Kindergarten has changed in recent years, children now spend much of their time in high stakes testing versus engaging in meaningful play, movement, and social activities to learn developmentally appropriate skills (Miller, 2009).

Play is not a new idea in education, especially in early childhood education. The idea of play in the classroom is an idea that has deep historical context. There are many theorists and researchers whose main focus was on play. Some of these include Lev

Vygotsky, Fredrick Froebel, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). While there are many theorists, Lev Vygotsky was one of the first. His focus on play and his work can be dated as far back as 1896 when he researched and theorized child play and development (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Others soon followed after Vygotsky. Because of his research later on in history many others were able to use experimental studies to show how play enhances and interacts with children's development (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Play-based learning can look different in different classrooms based on factors such as age or teaching style. "Any activity designed by a teacher with academic goals in mind has the potential to be play-based but there are guidelines that should be followed to ensure that the work truly is play and not an assignment" (Bautista, et al., 2019). There are many guidelines out there that can help a teacher to make an assignment play-based. These guidelines include that children are voluntarily engaged in the activity meaning that the activity is child chosen, the rules are made either individually or with peers, and they have freedom within the activity whether that be they choose what materials to use or they chose what the end product will look like (Bautista et al., 2019).

When kindergarten was first developed, it was meant to be more of a transitional year into school. Historically, when kindergarten was first created it was meant to be a place where children's natural desire to play could be fostered (Froebel, 1967, as cited in Pyle et al., 2018). Unfortunately today there has been a shift in that thinking. In the early kindergarten classrooms, there were a lot of materials for children to learn and explore with minimal adult direction (Pyle et al., 2018). However, kindergarten in recent years is

more focused on academics and versus being a place where five and six-year-olds can learn and evolve naturally.

The benefits of play in the classroom can encourage and promote growth in the kindergarten curriculum. Lynch (2015), advocates and states: Play in the classroom can encourage and promote growth in subjects like math and literacy, as well as social and emotional areas and it also benefits students in both high and low socioeconomic status'. Although there are clear benefits to including play-based learning into the kindergarten classroom some teachers have negative feelings towards incorporating play into their daily routines. While most teachers agree that there are benefits of including play into the classroom, many teachers struggled with ways to make play more scholarly or more academic saying that the ideas around play are "just for fun" (Lynch, 2015). Sometimes teachers also find that they run out of time to even include any type of play into their schedules. Many teachers also say that another reason they don't include play in their day is that with the higher expectations in kindergarten they feel as though something has to be cut out and cutting out play is better than cutting out math or reading (Lynch, 2015). This is where play-based learning can be a bridge between the two. With play based learning students can play as well as learn academic concepts at the same time.

Play-based learning has many benefits in the kindergarten classroom. Play-based learning can be used in all subject areas in kindergarten and it can be especially beneficial during literacy instruction time. The next section will talk about how play-based learning can look in a kindergarten classroom during literacy instruction time.

Literacy Instruction

Literacy instruction can look different in different classrooms. For the purpose of this study literacy instruction is being taught in a play-based way versus direct instruction. Direct instruction defined by teacher direction and highly structured by a pace that is set by the teacher (Pyle et al., 2018). Mathematics, literacy, science, and other subjects can be taught in a direct instruction environment. This project is about literacy instruction that is taught in a play-based way. Literacy instruction in a play-based environment would look more child-directed. The child may choose and select learning activities and experiments that are at their own pace as well as what is of interest to them (Walsh et al., 2006 cited in Pyle, 2018). When children are allowed to choose the activities, they are also more likely to be engaged in those activities. Play-based learning offers a reasonable response to the high expectations that are placed on our young scholars and teachers today in regards to literacy achievement (Klenk, 2001). This section will provide specific ways in which a play-based curriculum would look during literacy instruction time.

Teachers can promote and foster the development of early literacy skills by providing students with play-based learning opportunities in the classroom through literacy. Some ways that teachers can encourage this development is by providing a large quantity of high-quality literature in the classroom, providing opportunities to practice self-invented spelling, and providing dramatic play opportunities to practice oral language and print media (Pyle et al. 2018).

Listed below are some examples of how play-based learning can be incorporated into the literacy block in kindergarten. Painting introduces students to many skills like shape, colors patterns, and symbols. It teaches children that ideas or thoughts can be communicated through pictures and can help children learn to develop and portray the message an author is trying to send (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Painting can also bridge play and academics. Some students who have not yet understood that there is a connection between written and spoken words learn to make that connection through paint (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Painting also helps teach children to learn the difference between a subject and its background which is a perception skill that can help students to learn symbols on a printed page (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Painting also helps students learn directionality, oftentimes students learn how to stroke a brush from right to left which helps them to learn the early skill of directionality and reading print from left to right (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Paint is not the only tool that can be useful to include play-based learning into literacy.

Another way to include play-based learning in literacy is with manipulatives such as letter blocks. Having letter blocks or letter manipulatives in the classroom for students to use during play time can help students learn a number of skills that are related to reading (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Manipulatives can be used in all subject areas and can help students master different skills. While playing with these letters students learn things like shape, size, and sequence which helps students understand the whole/part relationship which is the beginning stages of learning to spell words (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Oftentimes teachers will use these letter tiles as a way to introduce sight words

and students then learn to use those words to make whole sentences out of the words (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). Manipulatives can go hand in hand with movement in learning.

Play through movement can also help develop students early literacy skills. “Movement allows students the opportunity to discuss the names of body parts and positions like legs, arms, sitting, standing which all grow students' early vocabulary (Gentile & Hoot, 1983).” Movement can help students learn many things in the classroom. These experiences also help children to understand things they might not understand otherwise. For example, if a student read “Sarah fell down to the floor”, that is something the students might not comprehend had they not had the experience themselves. (Gentile & Hoot 1983). Movement is a great tool to include when incorporating play-based learning into literacy instruction.

Some examples have been noted of students using literacy skills during play. One scenario was when a group of students was playing grocery store. The skills the students were observed using included students writing grocery lists, making signs for the grocery store, and making orders for items out of stock (Klenk, 2001).

Early Literacy Skills

Early literacy skills are the skills that are taught in primary grades to impact students in their later academic years. For the purpose of this study early literacy skills are broken down into three main sections: alphabets, fluency and text comprehension (Pyle et al., 2018). These three main topics can also be broken down into smaller topics. Alphabets can also be known as phonemic awareness. This includes but is not limited to knowing the letters and the sounds that those letters make (Pyle et al., 2018). Fluency

is learned through learning decoding skills as well as automaticity to help students read text which would include reading smoothly, with expression, and free of errors (Fuchs et al., 2001, as cited in Pyle 2018). Reading comprehension would be understanding the text that the student has read. Comprehension involves understanding vocabulary as well as narrative reasoning (National Reading Panel, 2000 cited in Pyle 2018). Early literacy skills are an important part of kindergarten.

When students enter kindergarten they also come with a wide array of early literacy skills Foster& Miller 2007, as cited in Pyle, et al., 2018). Some students entering kindergarten have had years of formal preschool education whereas others may have not had any type of formal schooling and kindergarten will be their first. There is a lot of importance around developing early literacy skills as they can be predictive of a child's academic success in the future (Duncan et al., 2007; Romano et al., 2010, as cited in Pyle et al., 2018). It is important for kindergarten teachers to bridge those gaps that some students may have in their early literacy skills.

A crucial part of early literacy development is alphabets. Alphabets or phonemic awareness has been shown to be one of the most important early literacy skills in students and needs to be developed in the primary grades to allow children to have the skills necessary to spell and read in later academic grades (Adams, 1990; Adams et al. 1998; Lieberman, 1989 as cited in Russell-Brinks, 2012). Phonemic awareness is also the ability of a student to be able to understand how the words that we say can also be linked to the words that we write (Abbott et al., 2002). An example would be when a student understands that the word "pot" has three phonemes, *p-o-t* (Abbott et al., 2002). There is

some correlation with alphabets and fluency as children must first be fluent in letter sounds before they can become fluent in words (Walton, 2014).

Phonics in the classroom can be one of the most uninspired parts of literacy instruction (Scully & Roberts, 2002). This can be credited to the fact that oftentimes phonics instruction is worksheet based because most teachers have access to phonics worksheets at their fingertips (Scully & Roberts, 2002). Scully and Roberts suggest using these readily available materials as the baseline to create play-based phonics instruction. An example that Scully and Roberts give is the worksheet that we often see as teachers where the students are learning how to blend CVC words and there is a picture of a slide on the worksheet to learn to blend the words. Scully and Roberts suggest taking this exact same lesson out to the playground and using the playground and real slide to practice blending the words even holding letters if desired (Scully & Roberts, 2002).

Fluency is an important early literacy skill to be learned by children. One early skill that students need to master before they become fluent readers is print awareness. When children begin to develop print awareness they start to understand that print is organized in a certain way and has meaning that allows them to understand that reading and writing have similar rules (Ebtesam, 2017). Teaching print awareness is an important part of kindergarten. There are many ways in which teachers can promote the development of print awareness including daily shared reading experiences such as a daily read aloud with students (Ebtesam, 2017). Through the use of these methods, students can become fluent in reading. Once children are fluently reading words and stories, it is easier for them to understand and comprehend text (Little et al., 2017).

In a study done by Cahill and Gregory (2011), they were in a second-grade classroom during fluency instruction time. The teacher of this classroom asked her students to define fluency and many of the students described fluency as reading as fast as you can, or when an adult times how fast you can read. Part of the problem with teaching fluency in the classroom is that it is repetitive and very dull (Cahill and Gregory 2011). It is important for teachers to be creative and incorporate new and fun ways to teach reading fluency.

The same teacher that Cahill and Gregory were interviewing shared some ways to make teaching fluency play-based. An example would be to have animal face masks and each child takes a turn putting on a mask and then reading a passage from a leveled reader or something similar in that specific animal voice (Cahill and Gregory 2011). Another example would be using a microphone and one student is the announcer while one is the interviewer. The announcer reads the book or passage like they are talking on the radio and after, the interviewer asks questions about the passage (Cahill and Gregory 2011).

One early literacy skill that play can help develop is reading comprehension. According to Moedt and Holmes (2018), Reading comprehension is the skill of being able to recall what was read in the text as well as apply that knowledge to make connections and answer questions. Reading comprehension also serves many other purposes later on in students schooling. "Reading comprehension is arguably one of the most important early literacy skills as it is needed to be successful in grades k-12" (Furtado & Pastell, 2012). Kindergarten teachers can encourage reading comprehension

in many ways in their classroom. One way that teachers can promote early reading comprehension development in kindergarten is with read alouds (Hoffman 2011). There are many benefits when teachers use read-aloud in their classroom. When teachers read aloud to students and then talk about elements of the story whether that be by asking and answering questions, or talking about the characters, children's reading comprehension improves (Hoffman, 2011).

Play-based learning can be a more valuable tool of assessment of early literacy tools compared to other high-pressure, high-stakes assessment measures like standardized testing (Klenk, 2001). When students are learning and practicing early literacy skills through play they are engaging in real life, rich learning experiences.

Teachers' Perceptions on Play-Based Learning

Teachers' perceptions and views on play-based learning can vary from teacher to teacher, school to school and district to district. Some teachers believe that play has a role in academic development while others question the benefits of play based learning (Lillard et al., 2013, as cited in Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). While there is some agreement, there is also some disagreement as well. Most early educators agree that a child's play is important in the development of our early learners, there are still some questions on how to best conceptualize play in the classroom (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Many kindergarten teachers support play-based learning discovering that the curriculum and instruction is being used, lacks consistency and or/clarity across different classrooms (Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004, as cited in Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Teachers include play in their classrooms for different reasons. Some teachers include play in their classrooms simply for the fact that they believe it makes their classroom or school more fun. Whereas other educators include play in their classrooms for the academic benefit (Fesscha & Pyle, 2016). In a study done by Fesscha and Pyle, they wanted to know what some of the challenges teachers faced when incorporating play-based learning into their classrooms. One of the most common challenges or barriers that teachers mentioned was time. Teachers found it a challenge to find time to plan and implement lessons that were play-based. Other teachers change the word “play” to “discover” or “explore” to make their play time in the classroom seem more academic (Scully & Roberts, 2002).

There are many ways to increase early literacy skills in the classroom. One way that has been discussed by many scholars to increase reading comprehension and vocabulary is through shared reading. An article shares how one example of play-based learning during shared learning was when they were reading about a sea turtle and how the sea turtle uses its flippers to move. Kesler (2010) also stated how he made use of movement. He actually modeled and had the students use their bodies to show what the text was describing, and in turn, increase their comprehension of the story.

While researching, I did find some gaps in the literature. Play-based learning is still an up and coming hot topic in education so it was hard to find specific examples of lesson plans used in classrooms currently. I had to piece together many little snippets from here and there to make my paper and project to be suitable for play-based literacy in kindergarten.

Summary

It is essential to understand what play-based learning is and how it can positively impact a child in any school subject. When incorporating play-based learning into the literacy block in a kindergarten classroom it can have a positive impact on a student's early literacy skills. Students' success in later years is dependent on how well they are able to master early literacy skills in their younger years. This knowledge will help me to develop my play-based learning curriculum for my kindergarten classroom in chapter three. In chapter three I will use some of the suggested play-based learning methods to aid me in developing an age-appropriate play-based learning literacy curriculum that will help my students master their early literacy skills.

In chapter three I will discuss my project in detail. It will give insight into why I chose to design my lessons and project the way that I did as well as the research that supports it. Chapter four will discuss the findings of my project. Chapter four will discuss in detail my reflection on my project as well as why it is important to my field.

CHAPTER 3

Project Description

Introduction

Kindergarten is a critical time in a child's development. For many students, kindergarten is the first time that they are ever in a social and structured setting. It is important for kindergarten teachers to be using best practices that not only aid in the academic growth of the students, but also in the social and emotional development. I am lucky to teach at a school where our philosophy is developing the whole child. In my kindergarten classroom, our curriculum is play-based. Play is incorporated throughout our whole day whether we are learning science, literacy, religion, or math. I have seen the benefits of teaching through play-based learning and I hope to educate others on the importance of the topic. This chapter will discuss how I came to develop my play-based learning literacy curriculum.

Chapter three will describe an overview of the project which is a play-based learning literacy curriculum. This chapter will also discuss the research behind play-based learning in the literacy block and why I chose the instructional methods that I did for the project. It will discuss the specifics of the setting where the project will take place as well as details on the participants who will use the curriculum. Later in the chapter, the project will be described in detail including the actual curriculum. This chapter will also discuss the timeline for this project. The research question that is guiding this project is: *How does a play-based curriculum during literacy instruction in a*

kindergarten classroom promote growth in students' early literacy skills such as alphabets, fluency and reading comprehension?

Method

When thinking about what design I was going to base my literacy curriculum off of, I chose Wiggins and McTighe which is also known as Understanding By Design (UbD) framework. One important part of the process created by Wiggins and McTighe is to first think about the desired outcomes, and then work backward (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). This was easy for me to do since oftentimes that is how I design many of my lessons in my classroom backward. After you have first thought of the desired learning goals, the second step is to then design engaging lessons and assessments that promote the knowledge and transfer of knowledge for students (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011).

Wiggins and McTighe stress how important it is to focus on skill transfer and also for students to have the ability to autonomously transfer as well as make sense of what they are being asked to learn (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). When using UbD the goal is for students to be able to first learn a skill, and then secondary be able to transfer between different subjects and or situations without effort. This should be a priority for all teachers and in order for teachers to make sure this happens, they need to be sure to provide engaging lessons and review and change curriculum when it is no longer effective to meet the needs of students.

When designing this curriculum, I also took into account the Minnesota kindergarten standards for literacy. Each state has its own set of standards that are explicit statements of what students are expected to learn by the end of a grade level

(Herczog & Kafai, 2003). Backward design and the standards for a grade can work together when designing a curriculum.

The play-based learning curriculum that I am designing will cover one week of literacy instruction (independent variable). In the long term, this one-week unit would be a part of the year-long curriculum. At the end of each week there will be an assessment. I will be focusing on quantitative data for the assessment of this curriculum project. There will be predetermined early literacy skills (dependent variable) (alphabets, fluency, and reading comprehension) benchmarks for each student to reach by the end of each week. Each week or unit may focus on a different early literacy skill and each assessment may not cover all of the skills. At the end of the week, each student will be individually assessed both orally and written. It will then be evaluated if the student met the goals for the week.

The methods and instructional strategies in this project were carefully selected to best meet the needs of kindergarten learners. In the next section, I will describe the kindergarten students more in-depth.

Setting/Audience

The school that I work at is in a small suburb north of the cities. It has around 600 students grades pre-K through eighth grade. Our school's student demographics are as follows: White/Caucasian- 92%, two or more races: 4%, Hispanic: 2%, Asian: 2%, and Black, American Indian, and Hawaiian native all less than 1%. We have a very low free and reduced lunch rate, as well as a very low ELL population. Our teacher to student ratio is 17:1 with an average class size of 22 students.

This year my kindergarten classroom has 22 students. Of these students, one student is on an individualized learning plan (IEP) and is diagnosed with Developmental Delay (DD). One of my kindergarten students is on an IEP for speech needs. All of the students in my classroom are serviced by one general education teacher and may be pulled out by a special education teacher based on their goals on their IEPs. Two of my kindergarten students are also pulled out by our reading intervention teacher three times a week for 30 minutes for extra support. We currently use a play-based learning approach in all of the kindergarten classrooms at my school.

This project will be implemented in the kindergarten classroom described above. The curriculum will be presented with different instructional strategies including whole group, small group, and independent. The curriculum will be play-based and will be incorporated into the literacy block which is 60 minutes long (in the morning), 5 days a week. In the next section, I will share more about the project timeline.

Project Description/Timeline

The project will be a one-week long lesson for play-based curriculum in literacy. The project will have a focus on alphabets, fluency, and reading comprehension. Students will be assessed as a benchmark at the beginning of the kindergarten school year in all early literacy skills. I will use this benchmark to determine what direction my project needs to take based on the assessment data that I gather.

I will design my week-long lesson on Google Docs. I have a lesson plan template that I use for all lessons. I will create five individual lesson plans for each day. Each lesson plan will have the materials needed for that day. Since this is a play-based

curriculum, a lot of the materials needed are materials that we have set out in our classroom on a daily basis. Examples of other materials that will be needed include letter tiles, magnetic letters, dramatic play center, and letter beads. Since the play-based curriculum is child-directed it is impossible for me to list all of the material since they have access to all materials in the classroom.

I will assess students on paper at the end of each lesson unit (5 days). However there will also be a lot of formative assessments included in this project such as observations, exit slips, etc. I will keep an assessment binder with a tab for each student where I keep the data I gather from assessing. I also plan to upload all of my lessons to google docs so that they can be shared with my co-workers and administration. This will also be helpful to go back and use them again next year.

The timeline to complete my project is by the end of summer 2020. I am finishing up my research design class (spring 2020) and will be starting the capstone project class in May. I hope to finish up my project by the end of the course. My goal is to include the project that I design in my kindergarten classroom this fall.

Summary

Chapter three has included a description of my capstone project including the evidence for using the backward design framework. My ultimate goal of this project is to create a unit (one week) that is a part of a whole year unit. The goal of each literacy unit is to have lesson plans for play-based learning in literacy to help students grow and master the specific learning goals for early literacy skill areas of fluency, alphabets, and reading comprehension.

Chapter four will discuss my project in more detail such as how I have grown, what I have learned from the process, limitations and policy implications as well as how this project will be communicated and how it will benefit others in the profession.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

When I first started courses for my Masters degree, I knew that whichever topic I chose to write my capstone on was going to be a topic that was extremely important to me. I also knew that if I was going to spend hours researching, writing and creating it needed to be a topic that I could take back into my kindergarten classroom. My research question of: *“How does a play-based curriculum during literacy instruction in a kindergarten classroom promote growth in students' early literacy skills such as alphabets, fluency and reading comprehension?”* checked all of those boxes for me. It was a research question that I was very passionate about as well as interested in, and I knew that the research and project would easily be taken into my kindergarten classroom and put to practical use.

The first section of this chapter will discuss what I learned from the capstone process as well as how and where I have developed as a learner, writer and researcher. The next section will go back to my literature review in chapter two and highlight a few of the key researchers and articles that I pulled from to develop my project. Next, I will discuss different policy implications from the project. I will then discuss limitations that I experienced while creating my project as well as possible future research that can be done related to my project. Finally, I will discuss how I will communicate my project as well as how this project and research can benefit others in the profession.

Learning From the Capstone Process

I learned more about myself during the development of my capstone project and paper as a researcher, writer and learner. While I have had multiple experiences in all of these areas prior to developing my capstone, the project allowed me to dig deeper into developing skills that I believe will be useful in many ways for the rest of my life.

As a researcher I learned not only how to find valuable sources through credible academic databases. Oftentimes when I would research for school, I would use a quick internet search to find research. I know that this is not the best way to find information as most of what we read on the internet is not credible. It was helpful for me to learn how to use keywords related to my capstone project and search them in the academic databases to find peer reviewed, scholarly articles. I also learned how to read the abstract of articles to be able to quickly decide if that particular research would be relevant to my work without having to read the whole article. I also think that something I learned as a researcher was how to be more organized with the different pieces of research that I was using for my paper. I kept a document specifically with the citations for the sources that I was using as well as a brief description of the research as well as how it could potentially fit into my own paper and research. Learning how to be a better researcher in turn led me to be a better writer as well.

I never considered myself to be an outstanding writer. Sure, I was able to always complete my writing assignments throughout high school and college and even managed to get decent grades most of the time but I still have never felt very confident in my writing abilities. My biggest takeaway from the writing process for my capstone is that I

have learned a lot more about academic writing. I learned how to synthesize my ideas, use proper APA formatting as well as how to use transitional sentences to make a paper flow better. Prior to learning academic writing through both the capstone as well as research design class, I was not very good at summarizing what I had read from a source. Through practice and doing it repeatedly during the capstone writing I have learned how to take what I read and summarize it into my own words. I also learned a great deal about writing using the APA formatting. Specifically, one thing that sticks out to me is learning how to use block quotes. Before, I did not know all of these little details. I also learned how to create transition sentences after each paragraph or major idea so that a paper flows better to the reader.

As a learner, I think that I learned more about how to prioritize and manage my time better. As for most grad students, the capstone project and paper are by far the biggest and most intense project that I have ever completed in my schooling. I always thought I was pretty good about managing my time with schoolwork, but this process took even more time management. I found great success with using a planner so that I could keep myself on track as a learner and complete the tasks that needed to be done with plenty of time to go.

Nothing that I learned was really unexpected to me, as I knew coming into the process that I had a lot to learn about myself as a researcher, writer and learner. I am thankful for the opportunity to grow in each of these areas and I know that the lessons I have learned will help me with my future endeavors whether it be personally or professionally. This section has discussed what I have learned from my capstone project,

the next section will discuss the literature review of my paper and how I used it to help create my capstone project.

Literature Review

There were a few sources from my literature review that really helped guide the development of my play-based literacy capstone project. The work by Wiggins and McTighe of *Understanding by Design (UbD)* was the method that I used when creating my five lesson plans. Wiggins and McTighe's use of UbD when designing engaging lesson plans is to work backward (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). As a teacher your first step is to come up with the objectives or goals that you want your students to be able to accomplish by then end of the lesson, and then work backwards from there designing lesson activities.

Another source from my literature review that I found myself referencing multiple times when creating my project was the article titled *Kindergarten Play: The Foundation of Reading* by Gentile & Hoot, 1983. In my literature review I talked a lot about the different examples that Gentile and Hoot gave on how to incorporate play-based learning during literacy. Such examples include painting, letter tiles and read alouds. When I was creating my lesson plans for literacy in kindergarten I referenced back to Gentile and Hoot and tried to incorporate many examples that they listed into my curriculum. I made new connections to all of the literature I reviewed, but specifically the literature like Gentile and Hoot where there were concrete specific examples that I could take and apply to the design of my curriculum.

This section discussed the literature in my literature in my literature review that best helped me when designing my curriculum. The next section will discuss possible implications from my project including policy implications.

Policy Implications

The research that I have done with my literature review suggests that there is great benefit for students when play-based learning is incorporated into the classroom. Through my literature review and research it was also noted that some teachers don't include play-based learning into their classrooms because they feel as though there is no time for it with all of the pressures to have kindergarten students reading, writing and doing mathematics at a high level. Teachers feel the pressure from administration that their students perform well on standardized testing. When there is pressure like this on a teacher, sometimes it seems as though there is no time for play. Oftentimes play also gets a bad name as teachers assume you either play or you either learn, not both.

My hope is that the impact of this research as well as my project is that the policy around academics and standardized testing will begin to shift specifically in kindergarten. I hope that educators can see that these types of things are not developmentally appropriate for students and there will be more focus on the things that are developmentally appropriate for students like play-based learning.

This section talked about possible policy implications from the project. The next section will discuss limitations from my project as well as different recommendations for future research.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While completing my project I did come across what I would consider to be a limitation. When I originally was planning my project, I planned to test out a few of the lesson plans in my actual kindergarten classroom as I was developing them. However, in March we went to a distance learning model due to Covid-19. Because of this I was unable to test these lessons out in my classroom. Although I was not able to test out the exact lessons, I have done similar things that are in my project in my classroom before.

From my research, I think that it is possible to branch off into a few different ways for future research projects for both myself and others. My project was a play-based curriculum in literacy. I would love to eventually create something similar but for another subject like math or science. Both of these subjects are very hands on with manipulatives and I think a play-based curriculum would be very successful and beneficial.

This section described limitations that I came across as well as possible ideas for future research. The next section will discuss how I will communicate the results of my project as well as why this could be beneficial to the profession.

Communication of Results and Benefits to the Profession

The results of my project will be shared in different ways. The first way that I plan to share the results of my project is with my colleagues. Specifically the two others that I teach kindergarten with as well as the first grade teachers. I also plan to share the project with support staff who work with kindergarten students such as our reading and math specialists. I plan to share the project with them via google docs so that they have

access to the lesson plans. It will be helpful to my colleagues who teach kindergarten because in my project I use the exact reading curriculum that we use in our classroom.

I also plan to hopefully at some point use the information from my literature review as well as my project to hold some type of professional development specifically for the preschool and lower grade teachers at my school. I think that it would be very helpful for them to hear research from different scholars on why play-based learning is so important in the classroom.

Tying into what I described above, I think that my project can be beneficial to the profession to show teachers the importance of including play into our classrooms, as well as giving them some resources and ideas as to how to start making play-based lesson plans.

Summary

This chapter described my research as well as my findings from researching and creating a project for the research question: *“How does a play-based curriculum during literacy instruction in a kindergarten classroom promote growth in students' early literacy skills such as alphabetics, fluency and reading comprehension?”*. Through this project and research I have grown tremendously as a writer, researcher and learner. I was able to dig deeper into my literature review and use the work of a few professionals to help better develop my project so it was based on both best practices and research. I hope that through my project some policies specifically the use of standardized testing and high academic focus on kindergarten is started to be looked at deeper. There were a few limitations with my project due to events happening in the world but overall the

development of my project was very smooth. I hope that from my research others and myself can branch off and continue research in other directions such as play-based math curriculum. The goal of my project is to share it with my colleagues and hopefully my project will be beneficial to other teachers who are looking to include a play-based curriculum into their classrooms and are looking for a place to start.

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