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BENEFITS OF USING PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

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BENEFITS OF USING PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN A KINDERGARTEN
CLASSROOM

by

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

Hamline University

St Paul, Minnesota

August 2020

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction

I spend most of my day with twenty-five five and six year olds. My days at school are filled with facilitating learning for the students in my classroom. My students motivate, inspire, and challenge me every day. If you came into my classroom you would see us singing, playing, engaging with each other, reading, writing, and learning all day long. Being a teacher means I need to teach my students in the most developmentally appropriate way possible. My philosophy of education also tries to embrace educating the whole child and does not just focus on teaching them academics. At the end of the year, I want my students to meet the kindergarten academic standards. I also want them to acquire knowledge and skills in other areas, such as social-emotional learning, higher-level thinking, empathy skills, and creativity. My students should be able to demonstrate that learning to me. As a teacher who wants the best for my students, I understand the importance of best practice and age appropriate instruction. After reflecting about my students and what is the most developmentally appropriate way for them to learn, I developed my research question for this project - *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?*

This chapter provides information about my teaching background and how I began this journey in education. Next, it covers information about my kindergarten classroom and a rationale for why I choose my research question. Information is included about how my educational philosophy relates to my research question. Finally, there is a

summary of this section, as well as an outline of the rest of my paper. For the purpose of this paper play-based learning will be defined as: learning academic or social emotional skills, while engaged in play, whether it be child-initiated play or teacher-directed play.

My Background

Working with young children has always been a passion of mine. I began working in a daycare when I was in high school and fell in love with four and five-year-olds. I noticed children at this age all had varying levels of academic skills, but despite these differences they all engaged whole-heartily in play. While students were playing, they would be having language filled interactions, being inquisitive thinkers, and they were all fully engaged in their activity. What I noticed is that when the students were required to do learning activities in the preschool setting, some students would shut down and others would feel frustrated if they could not do what was being asked of them. I wanted to make learning engaging for my students and bring up their level of enjoyment to learn, by bringing learning activities to their play. When I was able to bring learning and play together, the preschoolers responded well and began to enjoy play-based learning opportunities.

When I went to college, I wanted to continue learning about young children. I was able to learn more about their brain development and how children learn best. Throughout my Early Childhood Education program, we spent time in schools and in class, developing engaging activities to try out in our practicum settings. Although I had the opportunity during this time to work in different grade levels, I always gravitate back towards four and five-year-olds. After I completed my student teaching in Kindergarten, I

knew it was the grade I wanted to stay in. I was fortunate to be with a cooperating teacher who not only taught academics in an age-appropriate way but also valued play in her classroom and set up opportunities for her students to do both. I graduated from the University of Minnesota-Duluth with a degree in Early Childhood Education. My degree set me up to obtain a teaching license for birth to third graders, as well as, a license in Early Childhood Special Education for students ages birth to age seven.

Kindergarten Classroom

I was fortunate to get a job teaching Kindergarten right out of college. I found out quickly that there was a big learning curve from what we learned during college and applying it in our own classroom. When I was in charge of the education of a classroom full of students, whose skills varied, I felt it was hard to meet all their needs. I had an obligation to teach these students the academic standards, even though I believed some of my students were not ready for the rigor of these standards. It took many repetitions for some of these students to learn these skills, while others came in already meeting many of these standards. Although I was giving my students time to engage in free play throughout the day, it seemed most of our time was focused on academics. While many of my students were getting extra help to help them gain academic skills, I could see their level of engagement was down from when they were engaged in play. This first year of teaching was a year of growth for me and I do feel that I did the best job I could for my students. Each year I feel that I am adding strategies to my repertoire and trying to do what is best for my students in my classroom.

Although I switched schools once during my teaching career, I have been fortunate to be teaching kindergarten for the past ten years. Five-year-olds are still my favorite age of students, and I absolutely love my job. I have also been fortunate to work in a school that values play in our classrooms. My classroom has a sensory table, a dramatic play area, dolls, legos, magnet tiles, cars, dress-up costumes, an art area, and so many other toys for my students to explore. I have heard of schools around the United States that do not have these opportunities for their young learners and it is heartbreaking. Kindergarten is most children's first time at school and instead of having time to explore and engage with their peers, their time is overloaded with academic tasks. I believe if we are able to bring play-based learning activities to our classroom our students will not only have time to engage in play but also learn the academic standards. As we learn more about play and the impacts with young children, I have been seeing the trend of more rigorous standards take the place of play-based learning. Eberle (2011), while writing about play and the multiple intelligences, talks about the shift that is happening in schools.

In spite of this revolution, recess withers in our schools, and a scripted curriculum replaces free play. This shift is peculiar since, until about age six, we trust children to learn the most complex human skills such as language, pattern recognition, eye-hand coordination, socializing, and so on—all by way of play. But after that, our schools teach to the test, dissecting knowledge from context. (p. 45)

In my classroom, I try to keep what I am doing developmentally appropriate for the five-year-olds. The values of play are endless and I want my students to have this

opportunity in my classroom. An article from the *American Journal of Play* stated that “play should be viewed as a valuable classroom activity that enables children to develop a wide variety of social and academic skills” (Lynch, 2015, p. 348). During play, students practice social skills, language development, problem-solving skills, and so much more. During this school year, the time our kindergarten students have to play was cut back dramatically and the teachers I teach with were devastated. This was due to having mandated reading and math blocks. We do not feel it is developmentally appropriate for our kindergarten students to be on the same schedule as fourth-grade students. In the beginning of the year we saw many more behaviors and frustrations with our students when they were required to work through reading and math blocks without having a break. We know if we want our students to be able to focus on academics they need to be engaged with school and have time to recharge during free play time. When our students are not given that outlet we have less engagement during academics, more behavior problems, and our students struggle more with social skills. I also believe that we can incorporate learning activities into our student’s play throughout the day. “Play educates us broadly and deeply early on and throughout our lives” (Eberle, 2011, p.19). As a kindergarten teacher, I want to provide these experiences from early on. From what I have seen in my classroom the past ten years and from my beliefs about the importance of play, I want to understand the research behind my capstone question - *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* This question stems from my educational philosophy and what I believe are best teaching practices for young children.

Educational Philosophy

The basis of my educational philosophy is that I want to work hard to set up engaging opportunities to guide students in developmentally appropriate ways. I try to help them find a love for learning and school by making school meaningful and learning fun. The five and six year olds in my classroom need to have time to engage in play-based activities that are self selected with their peers. They also should have time to engage in purposeful academic play that is set up by the teacher. I have noticed that when our students are not being given these opportunities to play, they have more trouble engaging in school and working on academic skills.

I try to set up my classroom to meet the students' needs, depending on what level they are at when they start school. By getting to know my students and their families, I can understand what prior knowledge my students have and work to build upon that knowledge in the classroom. I believe that each student is capable of so many things and should be an active participant in their learning. Purposeful play opportunities can be set up by the teacher. For example, the dramatic play area or the sensory table can be turned into opportunities to work on academic standards, while the children think they are just playing. While students are playing in the grocery store, they are writing lists, sounding out words, practicing one-to-one counting, and adding money.

Each student learns differently and my instruction should be presented in different formats to meet the needs of all of our learners. One play opportunity may not meet every student's needs but each of my students can learn while playing. Every year, I feel that the group of students I teach are different. As a group, their interests and needs change

year to year, and it is my job as an educator to get to know them and to facilitate learning in a way that acknowledges the way they learn best. Using play in my classroom is a way that I can reach all my students, engage them in school, and I feel research can support my view.

Implications for Classrooms

I believe that when students are given time to play throughout their school day they are more engaged and ready to learn. Kindergarten students can also learn academics through play, as well as have time to practice important social skills. I have noticed that when we take play out of our classrooms our students are less engaged, have more behaviors, and lose their natural inquisitiveness. When we can set up our classrooms in a way that our students will learn best we are creating the best learning environment for them. Torrance (2001), a researcher, who studied Montessori schools stated that, “Play is the medium (for young children) by which the higher process evolve. Play is intelligence, problem solving, and creativity in action” (p. 8).

Conclusion

I want to be able to set up my students for success and help them learn in a way that is best for them. By adding play to my classroom I can more effectively meet my students' needs while teaching them valuable academic and social emotional standards.

In Chapter Two, numerous research articles are summarized that state the importance of play for young children. First, I shared information from articles about several theorists, including Montessori, Vygotsky, and Gardner. Each theorist has their own theories on how play fits into the development of young children.

Next, I analyzed kindergarten classrooms around the world to determine how teaching and learning looks different than in the United States. The countries that are covered in this section include results from: Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, and Japan. These countries were chosen because in 1989 they signed a United Nations policy for the Rights of the Child, which included play (Synodi, 2010).

Then, I looked at the effects of play in the context of how they can help develop literacy, math, and social emotional skills. Studies of what kind of play and what children can learn from it will be looked at. Literacy, math and social emotional skills are the areas looked at to highlight benefits in each of the main learning areas.

Finally, I analyzed the three models of play-based learning that will be looked at in this section: child-initiated, teacher-directed, and mutually directed play. The main differences between play and play-based learning are investigated. This section concludes with ideas on how play can be implemented into the kindergarten classroom.

Chapter three provides a background of my curriculum project. Information will be given about the curriculum model I used as well as demographic information of the students involved. This chapter provides information on what my curriculum project will include and the rationale for these choices.

Finally, chapter four provides a summary of my project and research question as a whole. A research based answer will be given to my research question. It includes a review of the major points of my literature review, a reflection of my personal experience, and future implications for my project and the next steps.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Early childhood education has become a hot topic around the world. Should children be spending these early years playing, while they are developing critical social-emotional, literacy, and math skills or are they ready for more rigorous classroom instruction? “The past two decades have seen an increase of attention to the phenomenon called play, as witnessed by hundreds of articles published in the research literature of psychology, anthropology, and child development” (Torrence, 2001, p. 8). Research from education theorists, studies from around the world, and play-based models are analyzed throughout this chapter to investigate play-based learning, to see how play-based learning is being used in the classroom and what its benefits are. “Play has been found to be beneficial for children’s progress and growth across the five developmental domains: physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive” (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018, p. 118).

In this chapter, research is analyzed relating to play-based learning in kindergarten to help further understand the research question, *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?*

The first section of this chapter looks at child development theory that is deeply rooted in early childhood education. Many theorists have impacted the type of learning that happens in kindergarten classrooms and have different ideas on how play fits into this model. Research from several theorists is studied, including Montessori, Vygotsky,

and Gardner. Each theorist has their own understanding of how play fits into the education of young children.

The research is then examined from kindergarten classrooms around the world. Education, as well as views about play around the world, may look different than it does in the United States. Schools in Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, and Japan provide a view of their tradition of play in kindergarten that covers three distinct geographical areas and different cultures.

Next, I analyzed the two models of play-based learning that are explained in this section: child-initiated and teacher-directed. The main differences between play and play-based learning is investigated. This section will conclude with ideas on how play can be implemented into the kindergarten classroom using the multiple intelligences theory.

Finally, the effects of play, in the context of the classroom, are examined. How can play be used to develop literacy, math, and social emotional skills? Explanations of what different types of play there are, as well as what children can learn from each type are noted. The three areas, literacy, math and social emotional skills are each analyzed in this section.

Theorists

Many theorists and researchers have weighed in on the topic of play and tried to determine what is best for young learners. Vygotsky, Montessori, and Gardner have each impacted the education world and brought to light their understanding of how children learn.

To understand why Vygotsky is considered a theorist who researched play, without formally writing about play, there needs to be an understanding of his research on the zone of proximal development (as cited in Morgan, 2011). Vygotsky claimed that the child's development in a certain zone shows what they can do independently as well as what they can do with support from an adult. He theorized that children can not just learn without having adult interactions to help guide them. During these interactions is when the child can develop the ability to complete new tasks. In a school setting, the teacher's role is to give children experiences that are within their zone of proximal development, as well as guide them to advance their skills through adult interactions (Morgan, 2011). Although his research focused on the three areas of language, math, and writing, he found the strongest correlation with writing and math. Without having adult support in these areas the child would not advance (Morgan, 2011). Vygotsky believed that writing should be meaningful to children and integrated into a task that is purposeful to them (at cited in Yoon, 2014, p. 119).

Another term related to Vygotsky's research is scaffolding, which is defined as providing a structure of support or how much guidance or encouragement is needed for the child to develop a new skill (Nordlof, 2014). In education, teachers need to be able to provide individual student supports to help them continue to grow, while making sure they are working in the child's zone of proximal development.

In the limited research that Vygotsky did specifically on play, he found that the type of play he was referring to needed to include "these three components: children create an imaginary situation, take on and act out roles, and follow a set of rules

determined by these specific roles” (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013, p. 113). While children are engaged in this type of play they are self-regulating their behaviors to follow their role in the play. We see this type of play in classrooms today, students may be pretending to play doctor and patient and each has a set role. According to Bodrova, Germeroth, and Leong (2013), when the children were asked to perform the same task, one group was asked to use their imagination and stand still be to a lookout while others were just asked to stand still, the students performed dramatically better in the context of pretend play. This study found the largest gap in performance when the children were around the age of five, and an almost non-existent gap for children around age three and children age seven. The research stated that the three year old children were not ready for advanced forms of play, while the seven year olds did not need support of play to continue learning in their zone of proximal development.

For students to engage in mature play, which is the type of play that Vygotsky found the most development occurring, there are several components that needed to happen (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). Children need to be able to use object-substitutes, for example using a box as a house even if it bears no resemblance to a house. Next, the children would need to be able to take on a pretend role and act like that character. Finally, this play would need to integrate many themes and continue for more than a day or single play time (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013).

A pair of researchers who also studied Vygotsky’s work, completed a study about the impact of play on cognitive competence. Gmitrov and Gmitrov (2003) found that one way that teachers can bring Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development into the classroom

is to carefully enter play situations to “shift children’s cognitive and emotional development to a higher level using the power natural engine of the free play” (P. 245). When teachers are able to do this, they found that providing this assistance in the child’s zone of proximal development can have favorable effects on the child’s learning (Gmitrov & Gmitrov, 2003).

Another prominent researcher in the education world is Gardner. His multiple intelligences theory includes nine intelligences: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and spiritual (Laughlin & Foley, 2012). Using these areas to find what intelligences work best for your students can help them capitalize on their strengths in learning. It is thought that most of Gardner’s intelligence studies were conducted with adults and because of this play was not explicitly mentioned in his research. “Play has appeared only in passing in Gardner’s thinking about intelligence, however, even though play instructs and trains the verbal, interpersonal, logical, spatial, musical, and bodily intelligences” (Eberle, 2011, p. 19). Gardner’s theory about the intelligences can easily be implemented into kindergarten classrooms using play opportunities. Students who receive instruction targeted to the intelligence most suited to their learning style can help actively involve them in their learning (Eberle, 2011). Play can be used to express these intelligences and help them grow in a classroom setting.

When children can use play to learn it enhances the child’s understanding. When children can have play opportunities that mimic the intelligence the child relates best to, it makes the experience even more powerful and enriching (Eberle, 2011). Eberle (2011),

who studied play in relation to the multiple intelligences, found that play can be integrated into all of the intelligences and that children can and should play to learn. In the final section of this chapter, Gardner's theory will be analyzed again in the context of how play-based learning can be used with each of the intelligences.

Gardner (1995) wrote in his book *The Unschooled Mind* about learning in an early childhood setting. He wrote about the importance of setting an appropriate classroom tone to help children understand why they are learning, not just learning through drills. The learning should also be informative and enjoyable to help seamlessly bring learning into the child's activities. For example, "children in "whole math" environments are encouraged to engage in games that involve measuring, counting, and comparing, not merely to rehearse number skills but also to help out in activities that are needed and valued" (p.228).

Another theorist who has made an impact in the world of early childhood education is Montessori. The Montessori community follows Montessori's belief that children should be guided towards a set of pre-chosen materials with a set goal in mind. However, young children naturally engage in spontaneous play. Research about Montessori classrooms, with children ages three to six, where children were continually engaged in spontaneous play will be examined (Torrence, 2001). Torrence (2011) looked for the connection between spontaneous, intrinsically motivated, freely chosen play and if/how it fits in the Montessori principles of freedom, structure and order, reality and nature, beauty and atmosphere (Torrence, 2001).

Montessori referred to play as an idle occupation (Torrence, 2001). Although evidence has shown that imaginary play activities can help children learn socially, emotionally, and intellectually, Montessori did not support play in her settings (Soundy, 2008). She theorized that children should be engaged in real world tasks (work) so they would be less interested in playing. While they are in their Montessori classrooms they should be engaged in real world experiences to help them gain independence while practicing these activities (Soundy, 2008).

In Montessori classrooms around the United States, there is a vast difference on whether or not they included play or if the teachers would intervene if the children were engaging in pretend play. Torrence's (2011) research findings were that the Montessori community needs to be more educated on play as well as providing these play opportunities during their day. It seems that although the Montessori methods are being used around the United States, they are not consistently using play (Torrence, 2001). As we learn more about young children these schools may find they need to find a way to incorporate play into this model.

Vygotsky, Montessori, and Gardner each had their own theories on early childhood education and how play fits into that model. Vygotsky's theory about scaffolding fits right into a play-based model, where adults are working to interact with students to help them continue to learn in their zone of proximal development (Nordlof, 2014). Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences also can fit into a play-based model where children are able to use one of his intelligences areas to learn in a way that is best for them (Laughlin & Foley, 2012). All of Gardner's intelligences can be brought into

kindergarten classroom in a hands-on, play-based way, which fits in with Montessori's belief of using a hands on model in schools. Finally, Montessori agreed with using hands-on and guided-play models in her schools, but did not believe in the benefits of spontaneous, imaginative play (Torrence, 2001). These theorists have helped to shape the education world.

As educators and administrators continue to make decisions on what is best for our students, they can use these theories to help provide instruction that is the most beneficial for our students. Just as these theorists have their own views on education, countries around the world each have their own educational model. In each model, play in kindergarten looks differently in schools and these differences and similarities to education in the United States will be compared in the next section.

Classrooms Around the World

Most classrooms around the United States follow the Common Core standards. These standards for kindergarten provide benchmarks for schools to follow for their students. Play is not included in these standards, so it is up to school districts, administrators, and teachers how these standards are required to be implemented into classrooms (English Language Arts Standards, 2010).

Other countries have their own stances on education, standards, and how play fits into their kindergarten classrooms. Places, such as, Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, and Japan have prioritized play in their kindergarten aged classrooms (Synodi, 2010). These countries span three geographical areas, European, Asian, and Oceanic countries, as well as provide a range of cultures. These countries all have mandated play into their

standards, which implies that there are benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom (Synodi, 2010).

Sweden and Norway, as well as other Scandinavian countries, have historically given priority to education and the care of young children (Synodi, 2010). In Norway, there is a section in their educational documents that is devoted to play. It requests that teachers ensure playfulness, care, and learning, in all aspects of kindergarten. Teachers are asked to use free play as well as teacher-directed play to help scaffold learning for their students while they are playing (Synodi, 2010). In Sweden, there is not a section dedicated to play, but it does state that “all activities should promote play” (Synodi, 2010, p. 194). Kindergarten teachers in Sweden are expected to tailor their instruction to their students' interests and needs. The curriculum in Sweden, “takes a more holistic, integrated and responsive perspective on play....” it also “applies to all learning areas” (Synodi, 2010, p. 196). Both of these countries have a tradition of using play in their classrooms.

In New Zealand, their academic standards are in a document called the Te Whariki (Synodi, 2010). There is not a section devoted to play, but throughout the document, play is mentioned. Teachers are expected to support play by extending their experiences. In the area of communication, free play is looked at as an experience where children can learn about language and creativity. However, the Te Whariki only mentioned play in certain sections, implying that play is related to certain standards only (Synodi, 2010).

Just as in New Zealand, Japan does not have one section on play in their curriculum document (Synodi, 2010). There are many references to play throughout the document, including both types of play, child-initiated (free play) as well as teacher-directed play. Teachers are encouraged to set up and organize the child's environment and to let their students use a variety of materials to express themselves during free play. In Japan, free play is encouraged to be used to help their students with their social and emotional development (Synodi, 2010).

Each of these four countries encourage play in their classrooms by having it in their standards/curriculum documents. The extent of play that is happening in these countries does range from country to country as well as from school to school. This is important because other countries are embracing the research that young children can learn while playing and are including this type of learning into their countries academic standards (Synodi, 2010). By adding this into their standards documents, they are making sure that all of their students in their countries are receiving a type of instruction they have found valuable. In the next section, the models of play that were mentioned in these documents will be examined.

Models of Play

When investigating the different types of play models used in classrooms, there first needs to be an understanding between the differences of play and play-based learning. Play-based learning is essentially to learn while at play. "Learning is not necessary for an activity to be perceived as play, but remains fundamental to the definition of play-based learning" (Danniels & Pyle, 2018, p. 1). Through this guided

play, an adult is overseeing and directing learning into the play experience. Free play is where children play independently without adult interactions to guide them, this type of play is child centered. This type of play is “fun, flexible, active, and voluntary” (Lillard, 2013, p.138).

When looking at *are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* There are two models of types of play that can be used in a classroom: child-initiated or teacher-directed play. Danniels (2018) defined these models in the article, “*Defining Play-based Learning*”. Free play or child-initiated play is voluntary and internally motivated, while teacher-directed or guided play has adult involvement to enrich play with learning opportunities. Both of these models have been found to be an important part of balanced kindergarten classrooms. Both of these models have been mentioned and used in Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, and Japan curriculum documents. Researchers have found that the benefits of free play are mostly for developmental benefits, while academic benefits are found with teacher-directed play.

Although most of the research done on play has been done from adult perspectives, when children were asked about play, they had their own opinions on learning in their classrooms. Pyle and Alaca (2018) found that children thought an activity was play if they were able to choose it by themselves. Learning activities included a teacher presence and were usually done at a table. When teachers in the study were able to integrate play and learning, and introduce it as that, the students did notice and were able to point out connections between play and learning from these rich play experiences, therefore enhancing their experience. These children also felt that if they

were engaged in play and a teacher called them over to a learning activity, then it made them feel that their play was not as important and was not considered learning.

In a report from the Alliance for Childhood (2009), the benefits of play were outlined in the article, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*. Almon and Miller stated that depending on the activity, children are learning many skills during free play. They are building language skills, using their imagination, building social skills, and motivated from within to solve problems. When children are engaged in free play, without adult direction, they are learning how to cooperate and play with others in a socially appropriate way. When children practice these skills they are also able to transfer these skills over to their daily behavior. Teachers are finding that some students need to practice this type of free, child-initiated play, because there is an abundance of technology and organized activities in their lives (Almon & Miller, 2009).

When considering the theorists who were examined in the first section of the chapter, in some ways Montessori set up these guided play opportunities in her classroom by providing choices, hands-on objects to use, and child-directed learning. In other ways her model did not mirror guided play because the students were given set instruction on how to interact with materials and she did not believe in fantasy play (Lillard, 2013).

Using Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is a way that educators can foster skills in the classroom during play-based learning opportunities. In the *American Journal of Play*, the author Eberle (2011) believed that "we need not trade rigor for joy in learning...to believe in the utility of the multiple intelligences to describe the range of human talent is to accept the instructive value of play" (p. 46). Eberle (2011) offered

many ideas on how this belief can be enabled in classrooms. Here are some examples that were given that match up to each intelligence and what can be learned from these activities. A child who learns best using musical and linguistic intelligence can build their vocabulary by listening to rhymes and vocabulary that emerges while playing. While children are creating rich, vocabulary filled playful interactions they are also fulfilling the interpersonal intelligence. While students play they develop empathy and cooperation while sharing a common purpose. “Music trains the brain as it requires us to concentrate and so exercises and sharpens our ability to listen and memorize” (Eberle, 2011, p. 42).

Intrapersonal Intelligence, the self-regarding intelligence, helps students learn more about their sense of self as they develop. Students who excel at logical-mathematical intelligences can learn using card games and counting rhymes while students who have visual-spatial intelligences can draw, paint, sculpt, or explore with LEGO’s or Lincoln Logs. Finally, students who learn best while engaged with nature can work on classification or spatial concepts while outdoors. It seems each intelligence can help students learn in a play-based way that is best for them.

The two main models of play, child-initiated or teacher-directed play, can each be used in a kindergarten classroom. During free play, the child is able to follow their interests to choose an activity and there is not a teacher interaction during this play experience. These students are practicing language skills and other social skills with their peers. When teacher-directed play is used, adults are able to scaffold the learning for the students by setting up play experiences or interjecting during play to enhance the

students' experiences. The next chapter looks at implications for literacy, math, and social emotional learning while using these models with our students.

Implications For Literacy, Math, and Social Emotional Skills

Play-based learning can be used in kindergarten classrooms to help children learn social-emotional skills and/or to learn academically. The National Association for the Education of Young Children stated that “Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition and social competence” (Dealey & Stone, 2017, p. 202). Recent research has found that play opportunities in classrooms are being replaced with teacher-directed academic instruction. Teachers struggle with having enough time to implement play-based learning instruction while they are faced with rigorous academic standards (Alaca & Pyle, 2016). Each area of learning will be examined, literacy, math, and social-emotional to see if there are benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom.

Kindergarten is an important year for students to develop pre-reading skills. During this year they should be exposed to activities that teach them the alphabet, phonics, phonemic awareness, writing, and other basic literacy skills. When adults are able to interact with students during play-based literacy experiences it can enhance their experiences. Scaffolding, as Vygotsky theorized, these experiences by adding more literacy experiences to play, as well as offering suggestions on how to play with these materials were found to have higher levels of engagement in voluntary literacy behaviors (Alacu & Pyle, 2016).

Researchers have found the benefits of having play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms are endless (Almon & Miller, 2009). Each time the children engage in play they are able to experiment with new materials and make new connections. As adults interject into these play experiences they can target the learning experiences for their students.

There are many play-based activities that have been found to nurture children's abilities to read (Gentile & Hoot, 1983). When children are engaged in painting and art activities they are able to develop skills to help them interpret the author's meaning. These activities also help them understand that pictures and words have meaning on paper. It helps children learn valuable print concepts, such as left to right movements. While children are playing with blocks with letters, they begin to understand the similarities and differences between each letter and how they can go together to make words. During dramatic play, children can learn about plot, characters, and reenact stories. These are just a few examples of how play activities can teach literacy skills (Gentile & Hoot, 1983).

In a study done by Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk (2018), there were twelve kindergarten classrooms that were studied in Ontario, Canada. Five of these teachers believed in using free-play to help children build their oral language and did not enhance their play in any other ways. The other teachers worked to integrate academic learning into the children's play. The researchers found that both groups struggled with needing more adults to help guide these play experiences. This study also found that having an environment that is literacy rich and available for the students to learn is not enough.

There needs to be teacher involvement to help “contribute to rich and targeted literacy practices during play” (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018, p. 125). When these teachers were available there was a higher integration of reading and writing while the students were engaged in play. Teachers can carefully intervene in the playing process to help extend their students learning while using the context of play.

When teachers are able to create these rich academic experiences for their students, the students notice. Literacy does not turn into an exercise practiced only with worksheets and lessons but it becomes part of these student’s days. Students who were in a classroom where the teacher was able to integrate reading and writing into their free choice were able to point it out to researchers. There are several ways that teachers can help direct play. Teachers can set up purposeful play opportunities in their classroom, such as: having students fill out a building permit for LEGOS, writing signs for dramatic play, adding books to a vet center, and writing stories at the art center. Teachers can also interject into the kindergartener’s play by enriching their experiences and bringing the learning to them. An example of this would be when the students were using blocks to build a house, the teacher could bring over post-its to help the students label the rooms of the houses. This would help students learn sound-to-letter correspondences and help students make connections that words have meanings.

One study that examined ten different kindergarten classrooms and analyzed the kindergarteners perspectives on free play and play-based learning found that when students were involved in setting up these activities, as well as when they saw a teacher presence in these activities, kindergarteners were more likely to consider it a learning

activity (Alacu & Pyle, 2016). However, when students were asked to leave play by a teacher to do an activity with them, children were less likely to understand that learning could happen during play. If the teachers were able to bring play to their activity they can make the connection that their play is learning.

Benefits have also been shown when play-based learning is used during math instruction. One way teachers can bring play-based learning to their math lessons is to have their students play teacher-directed math games. Studies have shown that students in classrooms who used this type of learning “outperformed students in control classrooms on general assessments of mathematical skills” (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). There are also many opportunities that have been found to help students with math skills that happen when students are in dramatic play. Students can practice counting skills with pretend money and counting while working in a pretend pizza shop or count items on a grocery store shelf. They can use a balance scale to weigh items or add price tags to grocery items. They can practice spatial skills while doing puzzles and geometry while building and creating with blocks. Research has found that when students play dice games they can practice their counting skills and build their understanding of the relations between numbers and quantities (Eason & Ramani, 2015).

Children also have the opportunity to work on social-emotional skills during free play. They are learning how to organize play and collaborate with others. Play can be used as a “medium for developing children’s creativity, imagination and divergent thinking ability” (Cheung & Keung, 2019, p. 628). Cheung and Keung (2019) also wrote about many other benefits that play can have on children’s social-emotional learning.

While children are playing pretend they are able to act out different scenarios while practicing their communication and language skills. Studies have also shown that children can learn problem solving, cooperation, and self-regulation skills during free play. Play can be a valuable experience for children to learn how to get along with peers and develop empathy.

Research has found that there can be benefits for math, literacy, and social emotional skills while children are at play. Benefits have been found during both types of play, child-initiated and teacher-directed play. A variety of ideas were offered in this section on activities that could be used in kindergarten classrooms to help students learn academics during play. The impacts on the research question, *Are there benefits of using play based learning in a kindergarten classroom*, is analyzed in the next section.

Impacts

Educators these days do their best to provide instruction to students in the most developmentally appropriate way. When looking at *are there benefits of using play based learning in a kindergarten classroom*, much of this research has answered this question. There are benefits of using play-based learning and other countries are using these play-based learning in their academic standards. The research provided in this section can help guide the best way to bring this type of learning to classrooms as well as the benefits that it can have.

Montessori (Torrence, 2001), Gardener (2011), and Vygotsky (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013) each have their own views of play and how it can fit into a classroom. The above research has shown that when these theorists work was analyzed

that the benefits of play-based learning can fit into each of these models and theories. Vygotsky (2013) theorized that children in kindergarten have a zone of proximal development and for them to move out of a stage and expand their learning they need to have an adult to scaffold their learning. These meaningful interactions between teachers and students, as well as giving the students time to engage in mature play can help students make academic gains. These interactions between adults and children can happen during play. Gardner (2011) also believed that if children are given opportunities to work with the intelligence that matched their learning style they could make academic gains. When teachers can target instruction to match their students' learning styles, it can help them actively involve students in their learning. Play opportunities can be set up to match these intelligences. Gardner (2011) also stated that children need to observe adults or peers at work or play in different learning areas and then be given time to practice these skills. Finally, Montessori (2001) believed that children should be guided to learn with hands-on materials. She was not an advocate for free choice or dramatic play, but her research does support a hands-on learning approach. When students can have a set of materials to work with and a teacher there to guide them, they can engage in ways that they are unable to do with the whole group- teacher directed instruction. The model of play that fits the best into her theory is teacher-directed play.

When looking around the world at kindergarten in Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, and Japan there seems to be a much higher value of free play than we see in the common core standards in the United States. Child-initiated and teacher-directed play both are used to impact kindergarten students learning in these countries.

Teacher-directed play, as well as child-initiated play, are both important to the research question: *Are there benefits of using play based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* When children are engaged in child-initiated play they are able to practice communication skills, problem solve, and act out real life situations while playing. They can follow their interests and engage in activities that are meaningful to them.

Teacher-initiated play can be a great tool for guiding experiences for their students to learn valuable academic skills.

Conclusion

Just as Vygotsky (2013) theorized about children who are working in their zone of proximal development, adults can scaffold learning for children to help direct their play to practice academic and social-emotional skills. Montessori (2001) theories provide students with hands-on materials to use, just as they might during play. While Gardner's (2011) multiple intelligences theory can bring play based learning to each of the intelligences areas. The play can happen in child-initiated play opportunities or teacher-directed play in a classroom. Classrooms around the world are using these types of play in their classrooms as are teachers in the United States. Other countries have "play" listed in their countries education standards and the United States does not. Much of the research above showed the benefits of this type of learning and the academic benefits that it can have for students. Developing these early math and literacy skills early on is very important for a child's academic development. Bringing these experiences to play-based learning helps the students to apply their learning to real life situations as well as meet the students where they are at. "Play has been found to be beneficial for

children's progress and growth across the five developmental domains: physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive" (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018, p. 118). I believe that this research supports play-based learning kindergarten classrooms. The age of our students is a perfect age where implementing child-initiated or teacher-directed play can make an impact on the child's social-emotional and/or academic skills.

In chapter three, an outline of a play-based, teacher-directed curriculum will be given. This curriculum will be for kindergarten students to utilize in the fall, when they are beginning to learn their letters. It will follow the Understanding by Design backwards design process (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences helped develop these learning activities.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of my project, where I developed a teacher-directed, play-based curriculum that focuses on multiple intelligences. The first section includes a research background of the theories and research that supports my curriculum. My curriculum was developed using the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences also was used to help design the play-based learning activities that will be implemented with the students through teacher-directed instruction.

Next, the model of my curriculum design is explained that follows the Understanding by Design backwards design process (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). These three steps are followed: first I identified desired results, then I determined acceptable evidence, and finally, I planned learning experiences and instruction. In this chapter, the setting and audience are explained.

Finally, a description of my curriculum project is provided, as well as my timeline for completion. This curriculum project answers my research question of *Are there benefits of using play based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* Using this curriculum model will bring learning opportunities into my kindergarten classroom for my students to meet academic standards. This play-based curriculum, based on Gardner's multiple intelligence theory, as well as teacher-directed, will help bring developmentally appropriate learning opportunities to our young learners.

Project Framework

When designing this curriculum I followed the framework of Understanding by Design. This design focuses on what is being taught as well as how students show us what they learned through an assessment. The focus is on teaching for student understanding. There is a three-stage backward design process that includes these steps: identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence, and plan learning experiences and instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

This framework is set up to make sure the activities being used are “purposefully focused on clear and important goals and if they yield appropriate evidence of learning” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 28). When educators teach using this design, they are

helping their students learn standards in a way that can make it relevant for them. This design can ensure that educators “identify and teach the essential knowledge, skills, and enduring understandings” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006.p 11).

Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences was used in this design. My curriculum included these eight intelligences: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, naturalistic, and intrapersonal (Gardner, 1995). These intelligences can help students participate in learning activities that are most suited to their learning style.

Play-based learning will be used during these activities, using the teacher-directed play. During teacher-directed play there is “joint-activity of the teacher and children with the teacher organizing and continuously monitoring the process, elaborating situations that require simultaneous cooperation, and encouraging interaction of all children in the classroom” (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003, p. 242).

These three models, UbD, Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, and teacher-directed play-based learning, helped guide me when I developed the model of my curriculum. I believe that there are *benefits of using play based learning in a kindergarten classroom*. These three models will help me bring these benefits to my classroom.

The desired results of my curriculum design will be that my students will have an understanding of letters and numbers. They will also have an understanding on how these can be applied in their lives and in our classroom. I will be using the backward design

process and following these three steps: identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence, and plan learning experiences and instruction

When deciding which standard to focus on for my curriculum design I also referred to the Understand by Design (UbD) framework. While analyzing the standards and deciding if the standard is broad or focused specific, I decided on the standards of: recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet (English Language Arts Standards, n.d). This standard is pretty focused specific, meaning it focuses on just one small goal and not that application of that goal. The goal for UbD framework is to look at the “big ideas and essential questions” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 27). When teachers are able to do this they can help their students understand the important content and how to apply that knowledge. I want my students to understand that letters and words are used in their daily lives and that there are many different letters to recognize.

Following the UbD framework, the next step in desired results is to clarify what my students will be able to do. My students will be able to identify all twenty six uppercase and twenty six lower case letters. They will be able to show their understanding of how these letters and numbers are used in their lives.

The next step in the design process is determining acceptable evidence. While using the UbD framework there needs to be a balance between standardized assessments and individual assessments. These assessments should “be responsive to students’ differences while still providing reliable information about student learning” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 35). The assessment that will be used is The Quick Letter Name

Knowledge Assessment (Tortorelli et al., 2017). More details about this assessment will be provided in the assessment section of this chapter.

The final step of plan learning experiences and instruction will be explored in the project description. When I planned this curriculum I will be focused on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The activities and resources will be used to help my students practice these skills in many different hands-on ways. The teacher will be there to facilitate this learning.

When I created this plan, I also needed to remember my audience and the setting that this curriculum will be used in. Research for play-based learning has found that this type of curriculum works best for children under six years of age. There was an “increase in cognitive manifestations” during play-based learning (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003, p. 245). In the next section, there is more information about my five and six year old kindergarten students and the classroom setting.

Setting/Audience

My curriculum project will be implemented in a school in the Midwest. The elementary school is situated in a rural town, in close proximity to a larger city of 86,000. The city the school is located in is a city of around 9,000 people and spans for thirty-four square miles. Ninety-two percent of the city is White (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d).

This is a smaller school district in our state and it has approximately two thousand students. This school district has a graduation rate of approximately ninety five percent. Ninety-two percent of the students are White. There are ten English Language Learners

in the district and thirteen percent of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch, which qualifies as a low-poverty district (Minnesota Report Card, 2019).

The public elementary school has approximately 750 students from kindergarten to fourth grade. There are one hundred and forty students in kindergarten between six different classrooms. The teachers of these kindergarten classes range from having two to twenty-five years of experience. The students in the kindergarten classes are five and six years old and there are on average twenty to twenty five students in each class.

When I think about the setting of our school and the students in my classroom, I will be able to create a project that will fit into the constraints of my school. I know that many of my students who came from play-based preschools will adjust well to this type of learning. Next, a description will be given of my project and how I believe it can be used in my classroom.

Project Description

The curriculum I developed will be used in my kindergarten classroom in an effort to bring play-based learning back into my classroom. I believe that using play in my classroom is a way to engage my students and help them make academic gains. I have researched and found that there are *benefits of using play based learning in a kindergarten classroom*. My curriculum will be used to teach following the kindergarten standard of: Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet. In the fall when this curriculum is implemented most of the students will be working on

recognizing letters that are not in their name. They are usually able to recognize letters in their names first.

This curriculum will be developed from a UbD backwards design method. The goal is for my students to have an understanding of each specific letter and number as well as an understanding on how these symbols apply to their lives at school and home. After doing the Learning Style Multiple Intelligences Survey with my students I will be able to find which multiple intelligence(s) work best for them to learn (Keimer, C. (n.d.)) . Then teacher-directed, play-based activities will be set up for each of the multiple intelligences in the classroom (verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and spiritual) (as cited in Laughlin & Foley, 2012). The teachers' role will be to set up and facilitate play in these different intelligence areas. There are eight lessons for letters that the students will engage in three times a week.

The best time for my students to learn these standards is in the fall when they begin kindergarten. By having a range of play based activities in my classroom it will help transition my students who come from a play-based preschool. It will help my students transfer their learning into daily activities rather than only learning through direct instruction. The best time for my students to learn these skills will be in September and October when kindergarten begins. The next section provides an outline of the time frame for my project.

Assessment

Several assessments that will be used that will help support this curriculum and provide data to show if this curriculum is successful or not. First, the kindergarten students will be given the Learning Style Multiple Intelligences Survey orally to see which areas in the curriculum they will be introduced to first (Keimer, C. (n.d.)). This survey will help the teachers know how the student learns best. Students will be welcome to try out any learning area, but the survey will help the teachers know which centers they may excel.

The Quick Letter Name Knowledge Assessment will be used for the pre-test (baseline), the progress monitoring assessment, and the post-test ((Tortorelli, et al., 2017). This test is a way to quickly test a student's letter name knowledge by testing them on a random set of eight letters. These predetermined lists of letters were decided with research by differentiating which letters are easier and more difficult ((Tortorelli et al., 2017). Although this data will not show which letters of the fifty two the students know, it will give a quick snapshot on where the students are with letter naming.

This data will be compared to other kindergarten classes in our building, who are using traditional instruction and not a play-based approach. This data will help find if there are benefits of play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom. The other classroom will be using the same assessment in their classroom and each class will have data to compare to my classroom's data.

Timeline

This curriculum project was developed in the summer of 2020 while I was in the capstone project course. When school begins in September of 2020 the Learning Style

Multiple Intelligences Survey needs assessment will be given to my kindergarten class. This assessment will need to be given individually to each student. The other five kindergarten classes will have the opportunity to participate if they choose. After the needs assessments are done I will implement this curriculum in late September and October in my classroom. There are eight learning activities for letters that need to be implemented during this time. The students will spend approximately fifteen to twenty minutes a day engaged in these activities until eighty percent of our students have met the standard, as measured by the assessment data. They will need to score an eight on the The Quick Letter Name Knowledge Assessment to show they have met the standard ((Tortorelli et al., 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of my curriculum project based on the UbD model. The curriculum I developed follows Gardner's multiple intelligences theory and the research on play-based teacher directed learning. Kindergarten students in my class have the opportunity to engage in different learning activities that are facilitated by the teacher to help them meet the standard of learning their letters and numbers. The assessment will show my students progress on meeting the standard of letter identification after engaging in these learning activities.

In chapter four a review of the research is given to help answer my research question of *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* A discussion of my personal experience of writing this paper and completing my

capstone project is also included in this paper. This paper will conclude with a section on future implications and a final summary.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Students in my kindergarten classroom are busy learning throughout the day. They begin the year learning their letters and finish by being able to read simple stories. They are also beginning to learn their numbers and by the end of the year able to do addition and subtraction problems. While deciding what types of lessons are the best for my students, I developed the research question of *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?*

First, a review of the literature from chapter two will be outlined. Included in this review will be research in support play-based learning. Special emphasis will be placed on Vygotsky and Gardner's research, as well as research from schools around the world. This research is important because it helps to answer my research question and helps to understand the best way to instruct children in the classroom.

Secondly, my personal experience with writing the capstone will be reviewed and summarized. Then the future of my project and research will be discussed. It is important that I am able to utilize my project in my classroom so I am able to provide research based instruction for my students. Finally, a summary of my paper will conclude this section.

Review of Literature

Throughout the second chapter several theorists have provided background on how play fits into the development of young children. Vygotsky's research on the zone of

proximal development brought up the understanding that children can not learn without scaffolding by an adult to guide them (Nordlof, 2014). Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences helps teachers guide their instruction in a way that helps students capitalize on their strengths in learning (Laughlin & Foley, 2012). Teacher-directed play, where adult involvement enriches play with learning opportunities, fits into both of these theorists models (Danniels, 2018). When a teacher is able to set up intentional, play-based learning opportunities, they can then serve as a guide in the experience and scaffold the learning for each individual's needs. When these opportunities match the child's multiple intelligences it helps the child learn in a way that is best for them.

The United States does not currently mention play in the Common Core Standards, which Minnesota follows, leaving it up to teacher or administrator discretion on how it can be used in the classroom (English Language Arts Standards, n.d.). Around the world, other countries are transforming their education to include play. The countries of Sweden and Norway both have educational documents that include guidelines to promote play in kindergarten age classrooms (Synodi, 2010). Free play and teacher-directed play are frequently used to promote learning in their classrooms. In New Zealand and Japan, play is mentioned in their educational document as a means to help their students develop language and creativity (Synodi, 2010).

Research has shown that play-based learning can help students learn literacy and math skills. During play children can explore new materials and make new connections. They can play with letter blocks and learn how to put them together to make words or act out stories in a puppet show. When teachers intervene, in a researched based and

intentional way, in play they can help the students extend their learning and bring in academic standards. Students can practice math sense skills by playing in a dramatic play area (counting items), doing puzzles, or playing a dice game.

What this research has shown is that play is supported and relevant in the development of young children. Even though the United States doesn't recognize play in the Common Core Standards, it doesn't mean that it can't be used to teach the standards. When teachers are able to set up purposeful play in their classroom, and work to scaffold this learning for their students, their students can meet the standards in a hands-on play-based way. By tailoring these activities to Gardner's (2011) multiple intelligences, students can engage in activities that match their learning styles.

Next, I will outline my personal experience throughout developing, writing, and researching this capstone project. The connection between my research question and my kindergarten classroom will be explored. Finally, my personal plan for the future implications of my capstone will be discussed.

Personal Experiences

While I was developing my research question for my capstone, I wanted to make sure I chose something that would positively impact my kindergarten classroom. I am fortunate to work in a school that values play in the classroom and my room is full of many opportunities for free choice play, my students learn to cooperate, problem solve, be empathetic, and creative through these opportunities.

Writing this capstone was a learning experience for me as the student. Even though I had an understanding of the theorists from my classes in college, this was the

first time I specifically researched them in reference to how they related to my job as a kindergarten teacher. I was fortunate to find plenty of research that matched my research question. Play-based learning is a hot topic in school around the United States and there was plenty of background information to support my research question. When I was able to make these connections to my classroom it made this research much more relevant for me. As a learner, it reminded me that I should continue to research and learn what is best practice for my students.

I hope to use this curriculum in my kindergarten classroom this fall. Depending on how many students I have in my classroom, I will need to be creative on how to use the materials we have to help students have these play-based experiences. When my kindergarten students start school they are in the process of learning their letters. Most of these students have come from play-based preschools, so this curriculum will help them transition into learning in the kindergarten classroom.

After I analyze the data, to help me answer my research question, *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* I am hoping it show that my students can learn their letters in a play-based environment, just as well or better than the students in the other traditional classrooms in my school. I also want to share this research with my colleagues and administrators so play-based learning can continue to be used in our classrooms. I will use my results to help our administrators understand that students can learn in a play-based setting and that this type of learning is very important in a kindergarten classroom.

The future implications of this project will be looked at next. Future implications in my classroom, my school, and classrooms around the world. The implications of play-based learning and policy will be covered.

Future Implications

Play in kindergarten is a hot topic, whether it be child-initiated free play or teacher-directed play. Both types of play help a kindergarten student develop academic and social skills. My project is limited to teacher-directed play-based learning in my classroom in the fall. My research has shown that this is the way children learn best, therefore, kindergarten classrooms need to incorporate play throughout the day/year in many different subject areas. Each kindergarten classroom at my school will need to be providing these opportunities to their students if the research shows that this type of learning is best.

I plan to continue my research into kindergarten curriculum, but further researching current best practices, more specifically in kindergarten. In my experiences, this is a year with lots of development, academically and social-emotionally. I want to make sure that the instruction I am providing is developmentally appropriate for my students as well as effective.

There are a few states in the United States that have mandated play in kindergarten, just as some of the countries mentioned in chapter two. Sweden's kindergarten aged students are mandated that "all activities should promote play" (Synodi, 2010, p. 194). In New Zealand, throughout their academic standard document play is mentioned (Synodi, 2010). In Japan, there are many references to play throughout

the document, including child-initiated (free play) and teacher-directed play (Synodi, 2010).

Right now in the United States, play is not mentioned in the Common Core academic standards. However, New Hampshire has passed a bill in 2018 (H.R. 1499) that states:

Instruction in support of kindergarten standards shall be engaging and shall foster children's development and learning in all domains including physical, social, cognitive, and language. Educators shall create a learning environment that facilitates high quality, child-directed experiences based upon early childhood best teaching practices and play-based learning that comprise movement, creative expression, exploration, socialization, and music. Educators shall develop literacy through guided reading and shall provide unstructured time for the discovery of each child's individual talents, abilities, and needs (p. 1).

I am hopeful that other states will follow the lead of New Hampshire. If states don't mandate play, then local school districts can make or have made the decision to incorporate play into their kindergarten classrooms. Sometimes these decisions can come from school principals or administration.

I hope that by bringing awareness to this issue in our school, it can help make changes in our local district and then those changes can be brought to other local schools and districts to help make beneficial changes for their kindergarten students. I want to help protect our students so they can have a play-based experience during their first formal school opportunity.

Summary

Throughout my capstone my personal experience of teaching kindergarten was discussed to develop the research question of *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* Chapter one covered the background experience of my kindergarten teaching career and the passion I have for providing developmentally appropriate learning experiences for my students. My educational philosophy includes this belief and my philosophy is ever evolving as I research more about best practices in teaching young children. This capstone experience helped me connect my research to find the best way it can benefit the students in my classroom. The curriculum I developed will help the students in my class experience play-based learning in a beneficial way.

Earlier in this chapter and extensively in chapter two, research was provided from three theorists, Montessori (2001), Gardner (2011), and Vygotsky (2013), which helped provide an understanding of how young children learn best and what support is needed from adults to facilitate this learning. Each theorist supported the idea of providing rich learning experiences for young children.

Other countries are finding ways to incorporate play into their learning standards, which the United States Common Core Standards currently do not support.

Child-initiated or teacher-directed play both provide unique benefits for students when used in kindergarten classrooms. When children are working on early math and literacy skills while using play-based learning it helps them apply their learning to real life

situations as well as meet the learning standards. This research not only answered my research question but it also helped me develop a play-based curriculum that can be used with kindergarten age students.

The curriculum I developed helped me to understand the future implications of my project and research. This curriculum was built on the Tomlinson & McTighe's (2006) Understanding By Design Framework to help my students meet the standard of: Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet (English Language Arts Standards, n.d). This framework helped me develop a teacher-directed, play-based, multi-intelligence curriculum, where students are not only working to learn their letters but also to apply this knowledge to their daily lives. The future implications that I want to impose on my students are to engage in developmentally appropriate play in the classroom, while they are also learning. Research has shown that when students learn this way they can make connections to their daily lives and are not just learning these skills in isolation. As I continue to research best practices in education, especially in kindergarten, I want to be able to share this information with my colleagues. I hope that as more teachers understand the importance of play, the more it can be written into our standards, like New Hampshire was able to do.

As I reflect on what I have accomplished from when I started this capstone, I have a much better understanding of the research behind my question of *Are there benefits of using play-based learning in a kindergarten classroom?* After teaching kindergarten for ten years, I know that this is such an important step in a child's educational development. As my students develop pre-reading and math skills while using play-based learning, they

will be able to apply their learning into their daily lives. When they are able to do this they can become more motivated learners as they work to understand their world. I am fortunate to spend my days with five and six year olds, and to have a job that I love going to. I want to use what I have learned to help my students become as happy as I am to be at school each day while they are immersed in learning.

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