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## Developmentally Appropriate Literacy Instruction in the Kindergarten Classroom

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Developmentally Appropriate Literacy Instruction in the Kindergarten Classroom

by

Lisa Luella Day

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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To Colleen and Shanyn because they are awesome and I could not possibly have completed this project without their continuous support and encouragement.  
To my mom because her love continues to make me braver.

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

-Fred Rogers

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	7
Background.....	7
Stakeholders.....	11
Context and Rationale.....	13
Project.....	13
Conclusion.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	15
Introduction.....	15
History of Kindergarten.....	16
Present Day Kindergarten.....	17
Emergent Literacy.....	19
Approaches to Kindergarten Instruction.....	22
Barriers to Implementation of an Integrated Approach.....	29
Implications.....	31
Conclusion.....	33
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	35
Introduction.....	35
Project Overview.....	36
Design Framework.....	36
Project Audience and Setting.....	40
Project Description.....	40

Project Timeline.....	42
Project Assessment.....	42
Conclusion.....	44
CHAPTER 4: Conclusion.....	45
Introduction.....	45
Learning from the Capstone Process.....	46
Literature Review Revisited.....	48
Implications.....	50
Limitations and Future Research.....	53
Communication of Results to the Profession.....	55
Conclusion.....	56
REFERENCES.....	59

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

When I first stepped into the world of teaching kindergarten 20 years ago, I instantly fell in love. Students typically entered school eager to learn and excited for each new day. As a teacher, I was trusted as a professional and was able to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of students. There was room for play as well as a heavy focus on students learning how to be in school. Over the years, the children have not changed; but what is expected of them has changed dramatically. Are these expectations developmentally appropriate? Do students benefit over the short term and the long term from being taught to read at an earlier age? Is play a necessary part of the kindergarten curriculum? These are just a few of the questions that lead me to the research question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*

### Background

My journey into the world of teaching began in a pre-kindergarten classroom in a play-based daycare in 1993. The directors were adamant about the importance of play in the role of learning. While we did have a group time and incorporated many stories into our day, the primary focus was play. Play was considered vital to the social and emotional growth of the students, while also providing significant time for the development of oral language. As stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2013), “Research evidence highlights that playing is also central to children’s spontaneous drive for development, and that it performs a significant role in the development of the brain,



particularly in the early years” (p. 4). This experience, along with my understanding of the research, was fundamental in developing my view of the importance of play and would significantly impact how I would approach teaching in the future.

When I later stepped into a second grade classroom, my situation was dramatically different; the curriculum was determined by the report card, the available resources, and what colleagues shared with me. Quite honestly, as a new classroom teacher, I did not have a deep understanding of what second grade students should be able to do or how to teach them. Upon reflection, I genuinely believe that an understanding of grade level reading standards would have assisted me to be a more effective teacher at that time. Especially as a new teacher, it can be difficult to truly know what students are capable of without the guideline of reading standards. Thankfully, having flexibility and creativity in how I taught made me a more engaged and enthusiastic teacher.

As a way of addressing the various standards implemented by teachers and districts across the state, the Minnesota Department of Education (2010) adopted the Common Core language art standards. Shortly thereafter, the district where I was teaching kindergarten began implementing the standards and moved to a standards-based report card. I was fortunate to be a part of a group of teachers from throughout the district that worked on *unpacking* the English language arts standards and creating benchmarks and rubrics to help teachers better understand them. This process helped me to appreciate having common goals, language, and expectations for kindergarten students across the district. It also gave a deep understanding of the Common Core English language arts standards. However, we quickly realized that not all standards seemed developmentally

appropriate for all kindergarten students. Furthermore, the number of standards for kindergarten students in English language arts alone was overwhelming with 39 Anchor Standards (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). As there were increasingly more state mandated standards, all were expected to be taught, assessed, and eventually mastered by each kindergarten student.

While there were some overwhelming pieces to implementing the Common Core English language arts standards, there were many benefits. First of all, I had a clear idea of what the goals and objectives were for my students. Secondly, it created consistency within the schools and across the district and made it easier to collaborate with other kindergarten teachers. Finally, it provided concrete guidelines for both new and veteran teachers alike. In my personal situation, I was fortunate to experience the freedom to teach the standards creatively with the expectation of working towards the same end goal as my colleagues. This freedom allowed me to teach innovatively and to implement play into the daily schedule. While I had guidelines as far as how much of our school day should be spent in literacy skills and activities, there was significant flexibility in creating a daily schedule for the students that I knew would be beneficial for them developmentally.

As more weight was increasingly given to the results of high-stakes standardized testing, there was suddenly a shift within the curriculum of my school. As our test scores were dropping, the administrator decided that a boxed curriculum would help improve reading scores on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA). This curriculum was not presented as a resource; however, rather as a mandate. The expectation was for

the classroom teachers to implement the state mandated curriculum with fidelity. Suddenly, I had lost my voice and lived experience as a kindergarten teacher. There were multiple aspects of the curriculum that were developmentally inappropriate for Kindergarten students. Specifically, the standards were not realistic about the emotional, social, or educational needs of five and six year olds and sadly, did not tap into the natural enthusiasm that students have for learning. One of the biggest struggles, however, was that this curriculum required extensive direct instruction and left little time in our day for students to enjoy and learn through unstructured play. As an educator, I found myself in a quandary. How do I implement a curriculum with integrity that not only takes away the ability for me to utilize all that I have learned and gained from my experience, but also squashes my ability to teach in a way that is creative, flexible, and responsive to the needs of my students?

Furthermore, while this curriculum supported the Common Core English language arts standards, it pushed students to do more and to do it faster. Students in Kindergarten were now expected to know skills that were previously learned in first grade. I wholeheartedly believe my experience is a reflection of the current state of many kindergarten classrooms across the nation. Test scores put fear in the hearts of the administrators (and oftentimes parents) and the reactionary solution has been to push our youngest learners more, with the hope that eventually it would lead to higher test scores.

As a result, I became passionate about understanding how to best implement literacy instruction that reflects the developmental needs of students in the kindergarten classroom. While I understood my bias toward the benefits and joys of learning through

play, I also had an appreciation for the benefits of common literacy standards and helping students reach their potential. It pained me that we were demanding more of our students and I wanted to explore the research literature to see what it shows about kindergarten learners. Was I ignoring vital research as a result of personal bias? I believe that students deserved the best of me as their kindergarten teacher. One specific way of improving as an educator was a willingness to look at the whole picture and not get stuck in a previous belief system. As new research evolves, teachers must learn, grow, and evolve with it.

My goal was to investigate and find the best ways to support kindergarten learners in the area of literacy, which includes reading, writing, and oral language. However, this project was focused on reading instruction. In order to fully understand the current state of kindergarten instruction, it was necessary to research a *play-based* approach versus an *academic or didactic* approach to kindergarten. Specifically, looking at the literature to see if there was a middle ground between these two approaches. My hope was to find that middle ground and examine how to implement it.

### **Stakeholders**

The most important stakeholders in this research were the children. It was imperative to consider the impact on students in the shift that has happened in kindergarten classrooms. Had the focus on meeting state standards changed the way that students receive literacy instruction? What benefits and/or detriments have resulted from these changes both in the short term and the long term? Along with the students as stakeholders are their families. The families of these learners are impacted by the way in which literacy instruction takes place. If students are struggling, it can cause their parents

and guardians a lot of angst. However, if the child is behind because what is being asked of that student does not align with their developmental abilities, it changes the game significantly. As educators work with students and their families, it is critical that the information they are sharing reflects both the needs and abilities of the students.

Teachers are also major stakeholders in this research question. Do teachers have the proper background in understanding what is developmentally appropriate for five and six year olds? For the teachers who wanted to incorporate more developmentally appropriate practice into their classroom, how much choice did they have? I have known many kindergarten teachers who have needed to close their doors during playtime, as a result of current policies. Teachers need to be given the research to support both what they are doing and that which they are asked to do in regards to implementation of curriculum.

While many teachers struggle between what they consider to be best practice and what they are expected to do, research based information is simply not enough. Often it is the administrators at the school and district level who have the true power to impact change. Many of these administrators do not receive training specific to early childhood education. As the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states, “an ever-increasing body of research documents the tremendous amount of development and learning that occur from birth through age 8 across all domains and content areas and how foundational this development and learning is for later life” (2009). Administrators may value play and are aware of the benefits, but they feel the pull of test scores, data, and standardized measures of learning. What type of professional

development has been offered to administrators to better understand the needs and complexity of kindergarten students? Policy makers are often far removed from the classroom and the impact that policy decisions make upon the children. Often policies are implemented with good intentions but have negative effects upon students.

### **Context and Rationale**

As a kindergarten teacher, this struggle is something that has impacted my teaching daily. There was a true frustration in being forced to teach in a way that went against what I genuinely believed to be best practice. However, this project was an effort to ensure that my beliefs were grounded in research, not simply experience. It was easy to find and read articles to support my position, but as a professional, it was critical to make sure my teaching was supported by research. Also, if the research did not support my belief systems, it would be necessary to revise and improve my practice accordingly.

After reviewing the research to demonstrate what developmentally appropriate practice entails, the next step was to create a kindergarten literacy unit plan. This unit plan will address the Common Core Standards of Reading Foundations for kindergarten students and utilize Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the lessons.

### **Project**

I created a two week literacy unit plan that integrates a portion of the Minnesota Language Arts Standards for Kindergarten students and Developmentally Appropriate Practice. I choose to focus on the Foundational Reading Standards of rhyming, onset-rime, syllables, and sight words as these are all skills considered instrumental in Emergent Literacy. In creating the unit plan, I utilized the research on Developmentally

Appropriate Practice to ensure that not only were the standards being addressed, but it was done in a manner that demonstrated best practices for teaching five and six year olds. As there is much debate between a DAP and academically-oriented approach to kindergarten, this project is an effort to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to integrate the two approaches.

### **Conclusion**

This project is very personal and something that I have researched with great passion. After 21 years as an elementary educator, including 16 as a kindergarten classroom teacher, I question whether I can continue as an educator in this role. The lack of efficacy and control over how I teach is real. However, the most demoralizing is being asked to teach in a way that is incongruent with what is known to be in the best interest of my students. Through this project, I was able to find a way that meets the standards that need to be taught, while also meeting the needs of the whole child in a developmentally appropriate manner.

In Chapter Two, current research and literature on the area of kindergarten standards, Developmentally Appropriate Practice, and early literacy will be reviewed. Next, ideas of how to integrate the standards into DAP in the kindergarten classroom will be discussed. In Chapter Three, this research and literature will be utilized in order to create a literacy unit plan that addresses the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?* Finally, Chapter Four will provide a reflection on the process of researching and creating this unit plan for literacy instruction in the kindergarten classroom.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The typical kindergarten classroom in the United States today is dramatically different than that of 20 years ago. In the past, kindergarten focused on developmentally appropriate activities with a heavy emphasis on play and socialization. In 2022, the primary focus in the typical Kindergarten classroom has shifted to a standards-based literacy measured through scores on standardized assessments. In order to understand what has changed in the kindergarten classroom to create the current dichotomy between developmentally appropriate instruction and academic rigor it was necessary to do a thorough review of current research and literature. By reviewing the literature on current kindergarten practices and understanding the research on early literacy instruction, it has been possible to answer the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*

First, an understanding of both the history and present-day role of kindergarten was reviewed. Next, the importance of emergent literacy and its role in kindergarten needed to be established. Emergent literacy research has had an increasing impact on what we know about young learners and helping them to become successful readers. Being a successful reader means the ability to comprehend and gain meaning from text (Westerveld et al., 2020) . However, the best approach to teaching these literacy skills has been widely debated in the literature. Therefore, the difference between developmentally



appropriate practice (DAP) and an academically-oriented approach to reading literacy was explored.

Ultimately, this review of literature led to investigating if there was research supporting the integration of an academically-oriented approach with one focused on developmentally appropriate practice. If so, what would a kindergarten literacy curriculum and practical schedule look like that effectively incorporated these two approaches? Research into each of these areas brought insight into ways that a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum could be implemented in the kindergarten classroom. In order to better understand the importance of an integrative approach, a brief history of Kindergarten is given.

### **History of Kindergarten**

The term Kindergarten comes from the German word for children, *kinder* and the German word for garden, *garten*. The concept of kindergarten was first developed by German Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), an educator who emphasized the importance of play in the development of young children. Two German immigrant women, Caroline Louisa Frankenberg and Margarethe Meyer Schurz are credited with bringing Froebel's methodology to the United States in the early 1800's. The first kindergarten classes were German language schools, also focused on helping children develop both socially and educationally. These concepts were later adapted into English speaking schools and incorporated to create the first public kindergarten in 1870.

From the start, the goal of kindergarten was to help children develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually through play. In a presentation at the Thirteenth Annual

Session of The National Conference Of Charities And Correction in St. Paul, Minn., July 15-22, 1886, it was stated:

The influence of the kindergarten upon the children is strongest in developing power. They grow in self-directing activity, intellectually and morally, strikingly manifested wherever the kindergarten influence is purest and strongest; and the entire training results in habits of mind and body which noticeably conform to a well-developed ideal in the mind of Froebel. (Mackenzie, 1886, para 17)

In conclusion, the importance of developmentally appropriate practice was key in the creation of the first kindergarten programs. Play was considered instrumental to the growth, development, and well-being of these young learners. The priority of these first kindergarten classrooms was to develop well rounded children emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually.

### **Present Day Kindergarten**

While the initial goal of kindergarten was focused on play and child development, that goal eventually shifted as kindergarten solidified its role in formal education and as a part of the elementary school. Different social, political, and educational movements have changed the role of kindergarten over time (Muelle, 2013). However, one of the greatest shifts has happened more recently with the incorporation of Common Core Standards, standardized testing, and accountability into public education (Russell, 2011). The shift has resulted in a change from a focus on child development to a focus on a more academically-centered kindergarten classroom.

The United States Common Core standards (CCS; 2022 ) “define the knowledge and skills students should gain throughout their K-12 education in order to graduate high school prepared to succeed in entry-level careers, introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs” (para 2). For each grade level, there are goals which define what a student should be able to demonstrate by the end of that grade. In the states which have adopted the CCS, these standards are required to be put into place by school districts. However, it is up to the school districts to decide on the curriculum and teaching methods that will be used to ensure that students meet these standards.

Common Core Standards have the potential to positively impact kindergarten education. For example, they can be an impetus to improve policies related to the professional development of teachers, the creation of a more community-based approach to early childhood education, the horizontal and vertical alignment of early childhood systems and the implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum (Brown, 2008). Furthermore, standards can be a key component in creating more equitable education and “can help us as educators to clarify where we want to go and give us a yardstick for measuring our success in getting there” (Bowman, 2006, p. 48).

As a result of the implementation of standards and other reforms, there tends to be an emphasis on specific academic skills over other types of learning (Brown, 2008). As kindergarten teachers are obligated to implement and assess these standards, it can lead to a shift away from the more traditional, child-centered approach to instruction. This shift often results in a tension between a developmentally appropriate approach to instruction and an academically-oriented approach. Subsequently, present day kindergarten teachers

are faced with the need to incorporate the standards-based focus of policy-makers into their child-centered curriculum (Brown, 2011).

There are forty-six Common Core Standards for Kindergarten English Language Arts in the United States. This means teachers are expected to teach all of these standards, while also focusing on the other crucial development tasks of five and six-year-old children. Within these Language Art Standards, many cover the area of Emergent Literacy and are skills that are critical to the future reading success of students.

### **Emergent Literacy**

The area of Emergent Literacy(EL) is of particular importance in this tension between Developmentally Appropriate Practice and academically-oriented kindergarten practice. In its National Assessment of Adult Literacy, The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) defines literacy as “the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.” The term “emergent” demonstrates the idea that literacy is developed along a continuum rather than there being a separation between pre-literacy and literacy skills. Therefore, EL refers to the different types of knowledge, attitudes and skills that are necessary before learning to read and write and are developed over time (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). It encompasses skills such as oral language development, phonological awareness, print awareness, and writing (Rohde, 2015).

Marie Clay (1966) first introduced the concept of Emergent Literacy in her dissertation *Emergent Reading Behaviour*. Prior to Clay's work, literacy was considered to begin with formal education when children entered school. However, the research

regarding emergent literacy changed this idea dramatically to see literacy as a developmental process that happens along a continuum (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Rather than seeing literacy as discrete skills that children need to be taught through direct instruction, Emergent Literacy proposes that children begin the process of becoming literate long before they enter school. Therefore, EL posits that the critical foundations for reading and writing are acquired through everyday interactions and experiences that begin at birth.

Different models have been researched and developed regarding Emergent Literacy, but two of the foundational models include those developed by Mason and Stewart (1990) and Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998). While there are some variances among these models, there are significant commonalities. Both models include components of children's conceptual and procedural knowledge of literacy, aspects of children's language, and the metalinguistic skills that children possess (Sénéchal et al., 2001). Within these components are skills such as semantic, syntactic, and conceptual knowledge; understanding and producing narrative; knowledge of standard print format; pretending to read; letter-name knowledge; detection of rhyme; manipulation of syllables; manipulation of individual phonemes; syntactic awareness; letter-sound knowledge; phonetic spelling; short-term memory for phonologically coded information; rapid naming of serial lists of letters, number, or colors; and interest in print shared reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Each of the aforementioned foundational theorists for Emergent Literacy have had a significant impact upon the definition and development of EL. Further research has

concluded that “there is not one clear path of EL development but rather a series of associated and concurrent experiences that result in the building of knowledge and skills related to the literacy process” (Rohde, 2015, p. 3). It is important to understand how each of the areas of print knowledge, language skills, and metalinguistic skills interact and intersect to provide appropriate instruction to EL learners. Ultimately, the skills involved in Emergent Literacy were found to be predictors of childrens’ future reading success (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

In 2008, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) conducted a meta-analysis of approximately 500 research articles in the field of early literacy with the goal of impacting educational policy and determining how families and educators could best support literacy development in young learners. The NELP identified six key variables as having a medium to large correlation to future reading and writing achievement: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters or digits, rapid automatic naming of colors or objects, writing or writing name, and phonological memory. In addition to these six key variables, five additional literacy skills were considered to have a moderate predictive value to later skills including: concepts about print, print knowledge, oral language, visual processing, and reading readiness. Since the former skills are predictive of later literacy achievement, they are often the priority in the kindergarten classroom. While these skills are often addressed through direct instruction, it is not only possible, but also important that educators consider how they can be addressed through play.

## **Approaches to Kindergarten Instruction**

While there are varying approaches to kindergarten instruction, throughout the research two methodologies are commonly referenced and studied: The Developmentally Appropriate Practice and the Academically-Oriented or Didactic approach. It is vital to understand these two approaches, specifically for students' long-term learning outcomes, and what they practically entail for both educators and students. Finally, it is necessary to consider how these two approaches may be combined and they need not be mutually exclusive.

### ***Developmentally Appropriate Practice Approach to Kindergarten***

The Developmentally Appropriate Practice approach to Kindergarten (DAP) traditionally refers to an instructional practice that promotes the strengths of each individual child through an engaged, play-based approach that encourages optimal learning and development (NAYEC, 2009). In a developmentally appropriate kindergarten, students are the initiators of learning. For example, in this setting, students may be given loose parts to play with and are the directors of their own learning. DAP is theoretically based on Piaget and Vygotsky, and the constructivist view that children are the initiators of their own learning through interaction with their environment (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). That is, children learn through hands-on experiences both in and out of the classroom. The focus is primarily child-centered. Teachers determine the goals and objectives based upon research, knowledge of the individual child, and understanding of the developmental stages of early learning.

One important aspect of DAP is play. While play has been the subject of much research and discussion, it is not simple to define. Eberle (2014) articulated his definition of play as "an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more" (p. 231). Play allows children to act out things in the real world that they are not yet ready for, to pursue the things that interest them, and to fully engage in the world around them (Kroll, 2017). While the actual definition of play is complex, many researchers agree that play is fundamental to the development of young children (Vgotsky, 1967; Piaget, 1999).

Throughout the research literature, two types of play have clearly emerged: child-directed play and adult guided play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Child-directed play is initiated by the child; it is flexible and open-ended. Often the term *free play* is synonymous with child-directed play. Contrarily, adult-guided play may also be initiated by the child; however, an adult guides or enhances the play through questions, comments, suggestions, and the introduction of new ways to interact with the materials (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Both types of play have merit in the learning process for young children. However, with the push toward more academic standards in the kindergarten classroom, the time for free play or child-directed play has decreased and adult direct instruction has increased (Kroll 2017).

In the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) approach to kindergarten, both free play and adult-guided play are important components of learning. Children need time to explore, engage in hand-on activities, and grow through play-based activities. As



Gullo and Hughes note (2010), “For children, play is serious work and is an important vehicle to promote language, cognition, social competence, and self-regulation” (p. 326). Although teachers can enhance this learning through direction, engagement, and guiding activities, learning continues to be child-centered and child-directed.

### ***Academically-Oriented Approach to Kindergarten***

Traditionally, kindergarten was designed according to the developmental needs of the students. It was considered a transition into formal education and a time to prepare students for more standards-based and rigorous academics. However, as Common Core Standards were implemented, there was an increased focus on, and movement toward, an academically-oriented, skills-based approach to kindergarten. As a result, there is often a dichotomy between kindergarten classrooms that are based upon Developmentally Appropriate Practice and those that are didactic.

The didactic approach tends to be teacher centered. Learning is considered more of a passive activity and tends to occur through repetition, direct instruction, small sequences of tasks and external behavior modification (Buchanan et al., 1998). In this behaviorist approach, students learn by being directly instructed and told what to do. Oftentimes, this approach is connected to a standards-based or goal oriented curriculum where there are specific outcomes that need to be mastered and it is the responsibility of the educator to teach them. Teachers use research and CCS to determine the skills that will be taught and incorporated into the curriculum.

Practically, didactic instruction in the kindergarten classroom means that concepts and curriculum that were formally taught in first grade has been pushed down to

kindergarten. Formal instruction in reading, writing assignments, workbook pages, and grading are now a standard part of the kindergarten curriculum (Hiebert, 1988). Another example of didactic instruction is the use of prescribed curriculum that is commercially created for kindergarten and is an extension of that traditionally used in first grade and beyond (Stipek et al., 1995). Finally, the didactic approach does not typically allow for integrated curriculum or a hands-on approach to learning for students (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

### ***Developmentally Appropriate Practice Versus Didactic Approach to Kindergarten***

The Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Didactic approach both have positive and negative aspects. The benefits of a DAP approach to kindergarten is that it tends to be more holistic, encompasses many different skills and abilities, and is very engaging for students and teachers. Conversely, a negative aspect of DAP is a lack of goals set for children and thus, the young students may not be prepared for the rigor of first grade and beyond. Kindergarten students may not acquire the skills needed to help them be successful with future literacy tasks. The didactic approach may benefit students who need additional structure and repetition to learn new skills; therefore, it could ultimately prepare students for first grade and beyond. However, this approach may be less engaging and place too much emphasis on literacy and math while completely leaving out other important areas of child development. Furthermore, it may decrease the initiative of students in their own learning and may not be developmentally appropriate for young learners.

As with any dichotomy, there can be extremes on either side. However, it is possible, and likely even preferable, to find a middle ground. Armed with the appropriate research-based tools, it is feasible for an educator to utilize a successful combination of a DAP and didactic approach to teaching. Research suggests that using the skills-based approach within a DAP is one way to address the current tension between these two approaches (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). Furthermore, as Common Core Standards are a required part of most kindergarten curriculums, it is necessary to find a way to implement them in a developmentally appropriate manner.

The research literature demonstrates an either/or approach to literacy instruction in kindergarten may not be necessary, but instead a balanced approach of developmentally appropriate and standards based can be implemented (Gullo & Hughes, 2010). Goldstein (2008), a researcher in the area of early childhood education, asserts that due to the socio-political context of the Common Core Standards, they are indeed DAP and should be integrated into early childhood education. Goldstein (2008) goes on to state, “Early childhood educators must commit to the ongoing work of developing practices that are responsive to all facets of DAP, even those that do not coexist easily, in order to ensure all children are well-prepared for successful academic futures” (p. 259).

The first step in finding a balanced approach is identifying where the Common Core Standards and the research on Emergent Literacy intersect. The Minnesota Department of Education Standards (2020) in English Language Arts (ELA) for kindergarten includes the areas of Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. Within the area of Reading, are standards in the areas of Literature, Informational Texts, and

Foundational Skills. As the standards are extensive, this paper will focus specifically on showing how the standard of Reading: Foundational Skills connects with the skills of Emergent Literacy.

The following table demonstrates how these specific CCS intersect with some of the previously identified emergent literacy components identified by National Early Literacy Panel (2008) as having a positive impact on future reading and writing achievement. By showing how these two sets of standards are related, it is possible to integrate skills that are deemed significant by the Common Core Standards and those that are considered developmentally appropriate by the National Early Literacy Panel.

Common Core Standard Reading: Foundational Skills	Emergent Literacy Skill
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.1 Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.	Concepts About Print Print Knowledge
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.2  Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).	Phonological Awareness
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.3 Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.	Alphabet knowledge Rapid Automatic Naming of letters
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.4 Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.	Reading Readiness

The aforementioned chart provides a clear focus for kindergarten teachers looking to prioritize the standards in the classroom. These standards are foundational for creating

a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum that maps to specific emerging literacy skills.

The next step in creating a literacy curriculum that aligns with DAP involves creating activities that meet these standards and are also developmentally appropriate. One option for a developmentally appropriate practice is Play Based Learning (PBL). PBL is one example of how child-centered learning can be unified with academic-oriented learning, as its ultimate goal is for children to learn while playing (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). This line requires the fine balance between free play and teacher directed activities. Educators have the opportunity to guide children through developmentally appropriate and engaging learning activities. In a study conducted by Pyle and Danniels (2017), they found that students experienced deeper and more effective learning through PBL than through free play or direct instruction. Therefore, educators have the opportunity to use play “as a vehicle to drive curricular competencies, such as literacy and numeracy skills” (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Play-based learning is a strong example of how standards can be integrated into Developmentally Appropriate Practice in literacy.

Another example of creating a developmentally appropriate curriculum that incorporates standards is through an integrated curriculum. For young children, learning is an integrative process and it should be centered around projects, themes, or comprehensive units (Selmi et al., 2015). Young students do not learn literacy in isolation, but instead it should be integrated into all aspects of their day. One way to create an integrated curriculum is through thematic units. In a thematic unit, an

overarching theme integrates the different areas of literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and play. It provides an opportunity to teach multiple skills across different areas rather than isolation. Furthermore, thematic work, according to Björklund & Björkman (2017), “facilitates a deeper knowledge and understanding of the surrounding world” (p. 98). Rather than learning skills in isolation, students are able to integrate what they are learning. It also gives students a deeper understanding of what they are learning fits into the bigger picture.

These different perspectives show that it is indeed possible to create a literacy curriculum that is both developmentally appropriate and academically-oriented. However, it is not an easy task. There are certain barriers that educators face in creating an integrated approach to learning.

### **Barriers to Implementation of an Integrated Approach**

As educators actively work to integrate academic standards into developmentally appropriate curriculum, there are barriers to implementation. These barriers include a decrease in the amount of time for play, an extensive amount of Common Core Standards that must be met, and a lack of choice in the curriculum used by kindergarten teachers. The decrease in play time for young students has often resulted in struggles related to mental health, self-regulation, body control, and paying attention (Hanscom, 2016).

Multiple contemporary researchers have found that time spent in academic instruction is increasing while play is decreasing (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). In fact, in many all-day kindergarten classes, students spend four to six times more time in math, literacy, and test preparation activities than they do in free play (Miller & Almon, 2009). As the

amount of direct instruction increases, the time for play and play based learning decreases. Educators are often given the number of minutes that must be spent in each core curriculum area throughout the day, which leaves little time left for play. While educators may want to integrate more play based learning into their curriculum, they may not have enough time to do so with the scheduling demands. These demands are often the expectations of administrators and school district leadership.

Another barrier to implementation is that kindergarten teachers must know, understand, and implement 46 English Language Arts standards. These standards are just one portion of the overall kindergarten curriculum. That is, in addition to literacy, teachers are responsible to teach mathematics, social studies, science, and social skills; all of which have their own set of standards and benchmarks. Depending on the specific school, district or state standards, there are even more academic expectations placed on teachers. These teachers are responsible to teach kindergarten children how to be in school and the routines that are a part of the school day. This can be quite the barrier to implementing a curriculum that is both developmentally appropriate and standards-based.

Furthermore, the use of scripted curriculums can be another challenge to the integration of DAP and standards-based instruction. Many schools now require teachers to use scripted curriculum to teach literacy (Miller & Almon, 2009). When teachers must follow a script, they do not have the authority or autonomy to teach in a manner that they may see as developmentally appropriate. Instead, they must follow the mandated curriculum with integrity and fidelity, leaving no room for professional judgment or deviation to allow for the unique needs of kindergarten students.

In sum, there are many barriers that kindergarten teachers may face as they work to create a literacy curriculum that implements the Common Core Standards and that is developmentally appropriate for all learners in their classroom. Although the challenges can be daunting, it is paramount that educators address and find the best ways to meet the needs of their students. The implications for creating a kindergarten environment that both meets the standards and embraces developmentally appropriate practice is further explored in the next section.

### **Implications**

The research literature is clear that both developmentally appropriate practice and academically-oriented approaches in literacy instruction in the kindergarten classroom are beneficial. While it may seem to be a natural dichotomy between DAP and a focus on academics, there truly is room and a need for both in literacy instruction (Allee-Hernandon & Roberts, 2021). The resulting challenge for educators is finding practical ways to integrate the high expectation of Common Core Standards into a classroom that utilizes Developmentally Appropriate Practices.

In order to complete this integration, it is necessary for teachers to be proficient not only in the Language Arts Standards, but also in the social, emotional, and physical needs of the kindergarten student. Teachers must find ways to incorporate these standards in a manner that utilizes play and engaging activities, rather than only use direct instruction. While students may benefit from direct instruction, they also benefit from learning through play.



Standards can be integrated into developmentally appropriate literacy instruction through purposeful play and thematic units. Purposeful play or play-based learning happens when teachers are intentional about creating a space where students can explore and discover in a manner that leads to learning through play (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Teachers can begin with the Language Art Standards and then develop activities that are developmentally appropriate to meet these standards. In doing so, educators can ensure that they are meeting the expectations of the district and state while still teaching in a way that is meeting the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs of the child. Thematic units provide a context for this purposeful play that combines different areas of the curriculum rather than simply teaching them in isolation.

While some of the barriers to this integration have been addressed, one of the primary barriers is the challenge teachers face in the overwhelming number of Common Core Standards in Language Arts. As a result, teachers often struggle between meeting these standards and incorporating play-based learning in the classroom. Often this is further compounded by the expectations put forth by administrators and district leadership. As a result, a curriculum that is based upon the Common Core Standards, yet incorporates Developmentally Appropriate Practice is one way to lessen the burden placed upon teachers.

Based on these implications for both children and teachers of kindergarten, I have based my project on incorporating the CCS, as adapted by the Minnesota Department of Education, into the kindergarten literacy curriculum. The goal of this project is to

demonstrate how both an academic approach and DAP can be incorporated into a literacy curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

This research review was focused on the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?* In exploring this question, I began by researching the history and present day purpose of the kindergarten classroom. The literature showed a dramatic shift from a developmentally appropriate approach to a more academically-oriented approach. Through this shift, there has been an additional burden placed upon kindergarten teachers as they try to balance these two approaches. Often seen as a dichotomy, the reality is that it is possible to integrate an academic focus into developmentally appropriate practice.

While the research shows that it is possible to integrate both an academic and play-based approach in the kindergarten classroom, it is not an easy task. Educators need the time and expertise to integrate these two approaches. Furthermore, they need the support of administrators and policymakers to ensure that there is space and time for the implementation of an integrated approach to literacy instruction. Without the support of those who create and mandate what is taught in the kindergarten classroom, it can be futile for teachers to attempt an integrated approach as they may not have the power and efficacy to implement the changes they see necessary in the curriculum.

As a result of the barriers to implementation that teachers often face, the research led me to create a unit plan for teachers that addresses the need for this integration. This unit for literacy instruction focuses on the Reading Foundations of the Language Art

Standards for Kindergarten. Each lesson will incorporate both DAP and an academic approach to instruction.

In Chapter Three, the Capstone Project which includes a two week unit curriculum for integrating DAP into a standards based curriculum will be described. It will include the methodology behind the project, a detailed description of the project, the intended audience of the project, and a timeline for completing the project. Finally, it will include how the project will be assessed for effectiveness.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

In Chapter Two, a significant amount of literature was presented which showed the current dichotomy between developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and academic oriented kindergarten classrooms. While there is much research on the benefits of understanding and implementing DAP, there is an ongoing trend of moving away from these practices. This research has an integral role in developing a kindergarten model that has integrated DAP into the literacy curriculum. In doing so, this project addressed the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*

The focus of this project was to better understand what an integrated curriculum would look like and then develop a curriculum that demonstrates how it can be done. It is not enough that the teachers of young learners understand the research and needs of their students. They are also expected to incorporate the Language Art Standards into their curriculum. It can be a daunting task to pull apart the standards and find a way to teach them that is developmentally appropriate for five and six year olds. As a result, this project can be utilized not only by kindergarten teachers but also with others, such as reading intervention teachers, who work with these students.

This chapter provides an overview of the Capstone Project and its implementation. The design framework is explained which was utilized for creating lesson plans that meet both the expectations of standards being addressed as well as the

social, emotional, physical and academic needs of the students. Next, the audience and setting for this project is described. From there, a thorough description of the project is presented, as well as the timeline for implementation. Finally, the manner in which this project will be assessed is shared.

### **Project Overview**

The main goal of this project was to create a two week literacy unit plan based on the Reading Foundation Standards for Kindergarten from the The Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in English Language Arts. Each lesson will have a learning target, outcome, and assessment. Furthermore, the lessons will demonstrate the integration of Developmentally Appropriate Practice and an academically-oriented approach. These lessons are a culmination of my desire to teach in a way that best meets the needs and developmental stages of students while also honoring the standards that are expected to be taught.

In order to create this project, not only was the literature review utilized, but I also chose a framework design to create the unit plan that would ensure well-thought out, thorough literacy lessons for kindergarten students. In addition to the framework, I used the concepts of an integrated curriculum to inform the creation of these lessons. Each of these will be further discussed.

### **Design Framework**

In creating this project, it was necessary to utilize a framework to ensure that all of the components of a successful unit plan were included. From the research reviewed, I chose to utilize two different types of frameworks to design my project. The main

framework used was the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework created by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). A secondary resource utilized was *Meeting Standards Through Integrated Curriculum* by Susan Drake and Rebecca Burns (2004). Each of these frameworks helped me to create a balanced and thorough unit plan for this Capstone Project.

### ***Understanding By Design***

The Understanding By Design (UbD) framework is a research-based framework for writing curriculum that focuses on teaching and assessing for understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). UbD is considered a backwards design, as it starts with the outcomes and ends with the activities, rather than vice versa. This design has been a proven format for ensuring that educators are teaching for understanding. As Wiggins and McTighe (2011) state, “Although not a novel idea, backward design as we frame it results in more clearly defined and wisely blended short-term and long-term goals, more appropriate assessments, and more purposeful teaching than typical planning” (p. 7). The UbD framework utilizes three main stages of unit planning in order to achieve these outcomes.

The first stage of UbD, which involves identifying the desired results, focuses on the outcomes that students will achieve (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). In this stage, I started my backward design by focusing on the desired skills and knowledge that students would acquire through this unit. Furthermore, this stage aligns well to working with the standards. For my unit plan, I utilized the Minnesota State Standards of Kindergarten Reading Foundations to determine the desired outcomes of this unit.

In the second stage of planning a UbD lesson, the objective was to determine acceptable evidence. In this stage, I needed to decide what types of evidence I would utilize to show that students had indeed met the desired outcomes. While focusing on the standards I had chosen, I determined which types of assessment would align with those standards and provide evidence of the students attainment of the skills and knowledge that were determined in stage one of the UbD framework.

The third and final stage of the UbD planning process was to plan learning experiences and instruction that would lead to the attainment of the desired skills and knowledge. In this stage, I designed activities and lessons that would align with the intended learning objectives. Having those outcomes and the type of assessment determined first, help to ensure that the lessons were actually aligned to the goals and not just frivolous activities.

The greatest benefit of utilizing the Understanding by Design Framework was that it ensured alignment both externally and internally. Externally, the lessons, assessment, and outcomes are aligned with the Minnesota Language Art Standards. Internally, the lessons are properly aligned with the learning outcomes. This alignment provides a framework for more effective instruction. It also provided an excellent design for integrating lessons that were standards based while simultaneously incorporated developmentally appropriate practice.

### ***Integrated Curriculum***

While the Understanding by Design principles provided the core framework for my unit plan, I also wanted to utilize an approach that helped to integrate the curriculum.

I found that the book, *Meeting Standards Through Integrated Curriculum* by Susan Drake and Rebecca Burns (2004) helped in creating a more fluid, integrated curriculum. One manner of integrating a curriculum is through a theme-based approach. In this approach, standards across different areas, such as mathematics, literacy, social studies, and science are incorporated into an overarching theme. From my experience and research previously stated, students learn best when there is an integration of concepts, rather than teaching in isolation. For example, literacy can be a part of mathematics and science and should not be limited to a literacy block. As a result, I chose the theme of pirates and found it a much more engaging and effective way to plan this literacy unit. While my main focus of this Capstone Project is a literacy unit plan, I also added resources and examples of how this theme can be brought into other disciplines to create a more integrated curriculum.

The principles of *Meeting Standards Through Integrated Curriculum* (Drake & Burns, 2004), utilizes a framework similar to that of Understanding by Design, but also looks at planning through a more integrated approach. It looks at how different standards can be incorporated into a thematic unit to help students develop a deeper understanding of the goals and objectives. The UbD was the main framework utilized in creating the unit plan, the work by Drake and Burns (2004), was also a significant contributor in how I designed my Capstone Project. The main goal of each of these frameworks is student learning, which leads to the next section: project audience and setting.



## **Project Audience & Setting**

The intended audience for this project is kindergarten literacy educators and their students. The primary audience would be kindergarten classroom teachers. My plan is to share these lessons with kindergarten teachers to demonstrate how it is possible to integrate academic standards into a developmentally appropriate curriculum. However, it is also possible that these lessons could be utilized by reading intervention teachers, paraprofessionals, and others who may teach kindergarten students.

While the teachers are the ones who will be implementing the lessons, ultimately it is the students who are the most important “audience” for this work. While creating these lessons, I envisioned a classroom of approximately 25 diverse learners. These lessons were designed with students at varying levels, abilities, and language proficiencies in mind. The overarching goal for this unit plan is to ensure that each and every student has the opportunity to learn in a developmentally appropriate classroom.

The setting for these lessons could be in a rural, suburban, or urban kindergarten classroom. While they were developed with whole group instruction as the focus, they could also be adapted to be used in small group instruction. Some portions of the lessons could also be utilized in a one-to-one setting. As the Minnesota State Language Art Standards were used in the development of these lessons, they would be most applicable to classrooms in the state of Minnesota.

## **Project Description**

My project is a unit literacy plan addressing the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*

The unit plan includes 10 lessons to be covered over a two week period in a kindergarten classroom. These lessons focus upon the Minnesota Reading Foundations Standards for kindergarten of rhyming, syllables, onset-rime, and sight words. While other standards are also incorporated into the lessons, these are the primary focus.

The standards that were addressed were taken from the 2020 Minnesota K-12 English Language Arts Standards for Kindergarten. They are all taken from the Foundations of Reading section of the standards. The goal of these standards is to demonstrate knowledge of oral language, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and morphology to read accurately and fluently. The specific standards that are addressed in this unit plan include the following: (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022):

Standard 0.1.1.2	Standard 0.1.1.3
<p>Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables and sounds (phonemes):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify and orally produce rhyming words, onset-rime and alliteration.</li> <li>2. Identify, count, pronounce, blend, segment and manipulate (add, delete, or substitute) compound words and syllables in multisyllabic words.</li> </ol>	<p>Read high-frequency words, in and out of context, demonstrating both accuracy and automaticity.</p>

As these standards are the primary focus of the unit plan, they will be assessed at the end of the unit. Each lesson will begin with a warm-up activity to increase student engagement and prepare them for the lesson. The main lesson will be focused on

literature, either a book or a poem. We will work as a group on specific skills and then students will have the opportunity to practice the skills independently. Each of the lessons will be tied together through the theme of pirates. Ideally, these literacy lessons would be tied into a thematic unit on pirates that would include mathematics, social studies, and science lessons as well.

### **Project Timeline**

This project has been the culmination of many years of experience and professional development. I am currently in the GED 8490 course and will have it completed by the end of August, 2022. My hope is to share this project with kindergarten classroom teachers in September of 2022. Furthermore, I plan to implement parts of the unit plan beginning in October of 2022.

### **Project Assessment**

In order to accurately assess the learning and outcomes of this unit, there will be a pre-assessment, informal assessments, and formal assessments. Assessment is an important element of creating and implementing effective lessons. Therefore, each of these assessments will help monitor and dictate the direction of the lessons. Assessment is an important element of creating and implementing effective lessons.

Typically, kindergarten students are assessed at the beginning of kindergarten for their phonemic awareness skills. However, included in this unit plan will be a pre-assessment for rhyming, onset-rime, alliteration, syllables, compound words and sight words. While each of these assessments will be included in the unit plan, teachers can decide which ones will fit best for their situation and their students.

Various informal and formal assessments will take place throughout the unit to ensure that students are on track with the learning goals. If students are not showing growth through the assessments, the teacher may choose to supplement with more lessons as needed. If students are quick to master a concept, the teacher can move more quickly through the related lessons.

One form of informal assessment for this unit will include monitoring the students throughout the activities. Teachers can have a clipboard with the students names and the desired outcome (e.g. producing rhyming words) and as students demonstrate their ability to demonstrate the outcome, teachers can make notes on the list. This form of assessment can be quick and a natural part of lessons. Another way teachers can informally assess students' progress is through the mini book that students will be completing. This mini book will be an interactive writing that is done with students. Teachers can monitor the students' work each day to ensure that they are following along and able to complete the tasks.

Formal assessments will happen at the conclusion of the unit plan. Teachers will assess each of the standards and desired outcomes created at the beginning of the unit plan. Students will be assessed for their ability to identify and orally produce rhymes, onset-rime, and alliteration. They will also demonstrate their ability to identify, count, pronounce, blend, segment, and manipulate compound words and syllables. Finally, students will show that they are able to read high frequency words both in and out of context. This formal assessment will need to be done individually to truly ensure that students have been successful in achieving the desired outcomes.

After students are assessed, the next step will be to analyze the data and look for trends. If a significant number of students do not reach the goals for one or more of the standards, it will be necessary to reteach the skills to the entire class. If only a small number of students do not achieve the desired outcomes, their progress will need to be monitored throughout the school year. It may be necessary to work with these students individually or in small groups to help ensure they are able to reach the goals by the end of the school year.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter gave a detailed description of the Capstone project that I have completed. Included is the design framework, the audience, the setting, the timeline, and the assessments that will be utilized in my unit plan to address how developmentally appropriate practice can be integrated into the literacy curriculum in the kindergarten classroom. In Chapter Four, the primary focus is on what I have learned both personally and professionally throughout this Capstone Project.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

As an educator for over 20 years, I have witnessed the pendulum of curriculum trends in kindergarten instruction swing back and forth. Currently, one of the most significant dichotomies is the tension between a developmentally appropriate approach toward kindergarten versus an academically-oriented approach. There is a pull between the standards that kindergarten teachers are expected to teach and finding a way to implement those standards that honors the individual needs and development of the five and six-year-olds in their care. This tension led to my burning question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*

Through examining my own biases, reviewing research and literature, and examining current practices, I was able to create a Capstone Project which involved a unit lesson plan for literacy instruction in a kindergarten classroom. While there were limitations to the scope of my project, it helped me really delve into what is entailed in creating a curriculum that is both developmentally appropriate and academically-oriented. This project helped solidify some of my beliefs around the importance of play and the need for making sure kindergarten utilizes Developmentally Appropriate Practice. However, through this process, I was able to identify the benefits and challenges of integrating academic standards into a developmentally appropriate approach.

In this chapter, I will share what I have learned, not only as an educator, but also as a student through this process of creating my Capstone Project. Subsequently, the research and literature that I reviewed will be revisited, highlighting that which has been most impactful to my project, as well as how I have come to new understandings through this research. Next, I will look at the future implications of my project both for myself and other educators. As a part of considering the implications, I will also examine the limitations of this research and ideas I have for future research. Finally, I will explore ways in which the results of this capstone project may be communicated to others.

### **Learning from the Capstone Process**

I have learned a significant amount through this Capstone Project as a researcher, writer, and learner. While I came into this process with a significant amount of experience both as an educator and as a learner, I found the development of this Capstone Project both challenging and rewarding. Each step of the process was an unfolding of who I am both as an individual and as a part of the greater education community.

For me, the most challenging portion of this project was the research and the literature review. I am so very passionate about developmentally appropriate kindergarten education and there so much research has been done in this area. It was easy to go down a rabbit-hole of research as each article was more fascinating than the previous one and I could have spent months upon months just reading the research. However, not all of the research was relevant to my specific topic and I had to learn to narrow down and focus on that which was truly significant to this project. It was important to look at the big picture and not become too overwhelmed by the many different facets of kindergarten education.

Essentially, as a researcher, I learned the necessity of being aware of my own limitations and that of my project and not trying to include every single piece of information that I encountered. This was by far the most extensive research that I have done and while I loved reading all of the research, my ability to synthesize and summarize improved through this project.

The most important thing I learned from this Capstone Project as a writer was the importance of feedback and revision. I also learned that the process of writing for this type of project incorporates many different styles. One must be able to shift from a narrative type of writing in one chapter to an academic style of writing in another chapter. Furthermore, a different style of writing is utilized for the actual Unit Plan that I developed for this project. Therefore, my writing was strengthened through each of these different styles. However, it was through the feedback and constructive criticism of peer reviewers, peer editors, instructors, and content experts that I truly grew as a writer.

I experienced growth on many different levels as a learner. On a personal level, I experienced the ups and downs of committing to such a significant project. Some days it was that commitment to myself, my students, and my profession that helped me to push through and continue with the project. On other days, it was the sheer joy of learning that propelled me forward in the process. When I struggled, it was a reminder of what it is like for students who are struggling. When I experienced the joy of a “light bulb” moment or learning connection, it reminded me that my students, too, have those moments. As an educator, I strive for that learning that takes place, but just as I have



experienced in this project, it does not always come quickly or easily. Similarly, students may need the encouragement and motivation that I also sought during this entire process.

As an educator, I learned that it takes an immense amount of purposeful planning to create lessons that are effective and efficient. The unit plan that I created only represents one small portion of what a kindergarten student is expected to learn and only a fraction of the lessons of the school day. However, it took a considerable amount of careful and creative planning to develop lessons that were both developmentally appropriate and incorporated the Common Core Standards. This project reinforced what high expectations we have for teachers and how overwhelming it can be as an educator in a kindergarten classroom today. I did learn that there is a significant amount of literature that supports the need to integrate academic standards into developmentally appropriate curriculum, but there is not necessarily the time or resources to support kindergarten teachers in implementing this type of curriculum.

### **Literature Review Revisited**

In revisiting the literature review, there were definitely some articles and research that had more of an impact upon my project than others. My goal was to answer the question *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*. Naturally, the literature that helped me understand the current expectations for teaching literacy in kindergarten was essential to my Capstone project. Furthermore, it was critical to my project to have a solid understanding of what developmentally appropriate practice looks like in a kindergarten classroom. Finally, the

literature which led to practical ways to integrate an academically-oriented approach with a developmentally appropriate approach were significant to my research.

One of the most important aspects of understanding the current dichotomy of an academically-oriented versus a developmentally appropriate approach is the research that reflects the impact of Common Core Standards on kindergarten practice. The Common Core Standards themselves (2022), were a significant resource in this project as it is nearly impossible to understand what an academically-oriented literacy curriculum looks like without first understanding the Language Arts Common Core Standards that are currently being utilized across the country, including in Minnesota. In addition, research from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) helped me to gain a deeper understanding of which aspects of literacy have been shown to be most critical for early learners. Together, the literature regarding the Common Core Standards along with the NELP gave a well rounded understanding of literacy development in kindergarten children.

There is a plethora of research on what a developmentally appropriate kindergarten classroom should look like and one key component is play. Therefore, the research and literature that I reviewed regarding play in the classroom had a significant impact upon my capstone project. One of the most impactful of these was the article *The Contribution of Play Experiences in Early Literacy: Expanding the Science of Reading*. (Rand & Morrow, 2021). This article demonstrates the importance of play in literacy development utilizing research around the science of reading. Much of the research around literacy and play is encapsulated by Rand and Morrow(2021) in the following:

The role of play, seen in the context of the simple view of reading, is important primarily because it contributes to language skills that relate to linguistic comprehension and, secondarily, because it helps children develop the functional skills of working with print and texts. (p. S240)

This research demonstrates that not only are play and developmentally appropriate practice good to incorporate into the literacy curriculum, they are essential to the development of the language skills and functional skills needed for literacy development.

In addition to the literature previously reviewed, perhaps the most impactful literature that I utilized included two pieces of literature that demonstrated how it truly is possible and beneficial to incorporate both academic standards and developmentally appropriate practice into the kindergarten literacy curriculum. *Read, write, play, learn: Literacy instruction in today's kindergarten* (Rog, 2011) and *Designing high-quality centers for learning* (Selmi & Mora-Flores, 2015) explored the research behind integrating an academically-oriented and a developmentally appropriate approach to literacy instruction. In addition, they gave practical strategies for developing literacy instruction that is both standards-based and developmentally appropriate. It was these two pieces of literature that helped me see the possibility of finding balance between academics and play in the kindergarten classroom.

### **Implications**

After reviewing the research and creating a Capstone Project, there were some clear implications as a result of this work. One of the primary implications is the need to make sure that developmentally appropriate practices are implemented into the

kindergarten classroom. The second major implication is the imminent need for advocacy and policy making in the area of developmentally appropriate instruction for kindergarten students.

The research was clear on the benefits of creating a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for kindergarten students. It is a successful form of teaching young learners, both in the short-term and the long-term. Through developmentally appropriate practices, including play, students learn the important skills of self-regulation, communication, social interaction, and increased vocabulary. Furthermore, students learn best through engaging practices, such as hands-on learning, where they have ownership in what they are learning. Moreover, the learning is not all teacher directed or solely academic focused.

As there is an increase in the demand for academic or standards-based education, it is imperative that developmentally appropriate approaches do not get completely left behind. Instead, an approach that integrates both an academic approach and a developmentally appropriate approach is the most effective and efficient way to ensure that the established standards are being met; however, in a way that honors the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of each kindergarten student. In researching this project, I found that there are benefits to an academically-oriented approach, but it should not happen at the expense of looking at the needs of the whole child.

A clear implication resulting from this integrated approach is the necessity for advocacy and policy making. Teachers have been given a nearly impossible task of taking

all of the Common Core Standards and teaching them in a manner that is developmentally appropriate for five and six year olds. During my Capstone Project, I spent an extensive amount of time on my unit plan. However, my unit plan only covered 2 of the 144 Language Arts Standards for kindergarten. It is not feasible to ask teachers to spend this much time on every single standard for kindergarten. Therefore, kindergarten teachers need the time to create plans that are both developmentally appropriate and standards-based. In addition to needing time, teachers may benefit from professional development and/or mentors who can help guide them through the process. Teachers must be proficient not only in the Common Core standards, but also in the developmental needs and abilities of the kindergarten student.

In addition to these needs of the kindergarten teacher, there is also a need for administrators and policy-makers to understand the intricacies of the kindergarten classroom. At times it is easy to make decisions about standards and the curriculum that must be taught when removed from the classroom. However, with a true understanding of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, these decisions may become more challenging, but they will also be far more informed.

A final implication of this research and Capstone project is that there is clear research on the benefits of play and other developmentally appropriate practices. However, it seems to be a continual fight for teachers to keep these elements in their instruction, not only in literacy, but also in other academic areas. Instead of embracing the research that shows the many benefits of play, policy makers tend to focus only on the standards and making sure that students meet those standards. Often, the different levels

and abilities of the individual child is not taken into account. Instead, it is a one-size-fits-all approach to the kindergarten curriculum. It is imperative that administrators and policy-makers know, understand, and embrace the importance of developmentally appropriate practices in the kindergarten classroom.

These implications lead to the areas of further research of this project. In order to look at the possibilities of future research, it is also important to understand the limitations of this Capstone Project. These two areas of limitations and future research will be the focus of the following section.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

In researching to understand *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*, not only do the limitations of the project need to be addressed, but it is also important to consider how these limitations could lead to further research. One limitation is the scope of this project and the areas that could be more fully developed. Another limitation is the role and efficacy of teachers. Finally, the need for a deeper understanding of play and other developmentally appropriate practices and how that can impact policy is a limitation of this project.

The scope of this project is quite limited. It only addresses one small portion of the literacy standards for kindergarten. Furthermore, it does not go deeply into the needs of language learners, learners with special needs, or students with developmental delays. While there is much research on both an academically-oriented approach and developmentally appropriate practice and how they can benefit a variety of learners, that was not covered in this project. I do believe an excellent area for further research would

be to understand the research and literature on how an integrated approach could be beneficial to specific sub-groups of students.

This project also has a significant limitation in the assumption that teachers have some control in the development of the curriculum that they utilize in their classroom. The ideal way to create a literacy curriculum that integrates both standards and developmentally appropriate practice would be to create the curriculum based upon these two factors. However, many teachers must teach a published (or boxed) curriculum and have no control over the lessons that they are expected to teach. As a result, it can be much more difficult to integrate a developmentally appropriate approach into a set curriculum that must be implemented with integrity and fidelity. Furthermore, teachers can not adjust the curriculum to meet the specific needs of their individual students. Consequently, many teachers feel stuck and unable to control not only the planning, but the outcome of the curriculum that they must implement. As a result, an area for further research would be to look at the effectiveness in using published literacy curriculum in the kindergarten classroom. However, it would be critical that not only the standards being addressed were reviewed, but also whether or not the curriculum was developmentally appropriate.

A final limitation of this Capstone project was the limited number of ways to implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum.. There is a lot of research on play, but it would be interesting to research other aspects of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, as well as the benefits of a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Once that research was concluded, it would be possible to look at how to share this information

with the administrators and policymakers who make the decisions surrounding the literacy curriculum in the kindergarten classroom.

### **Communication of Results to the Profession**

I have learned so much through this entire capstone process, that the next step will be how to share my findings with this profession. While I have benefited greatly from the development of this Capstone project, it is also critical to share the results with others in my profession. My first goal will be to share this information with those who work with me. After sharing the information with colleagues, I would also like to utilize what I have learned and communicate the results as an advocate for both kindergarten students and educators.

First, I will share this project with the kindergarten teachers and administration in my district. After implementing it myself, I would like to make it available to the kindergarten teachers who work with me. I would also give them permission to share it beyond our district. I would also like to share my findings with the principal and superintendent of my district as there are many implications that relate to decision making and curriculum implementation.

Ultimately, I would like this project to be a springboard for advocacy. I am incredibly passionate about the need for kindergarten to be developmentally appropriate. I am equally passionate about students being given the tools and opportunities to experience academic success. However, I know that many kindergarten teachers are caught in the tension between knowing what is developmentally appropriate and the demand to push students beyond or even to accelerate their learning. My goal is to be an



advocate both for the children and the educators to make sure that we are not harming our students by pushing too much academic rigor upon our youngest learners. By using this Capstone as a springboard, I could utilize the information I have learned to become an advocate. It is imperative that this research reach the higher levels of people who make decisions about curriculum and policy. Oftentimes, administrators are far removed from the reality of the kindergarten classroom and they need to be shown what it is really like in the classroom. If we have academic rigor and standards, without an understanding of the whole child, not only are we not doing the best teaching possible, but we are quite possibly harming some of our youngest learners. For these reasons, I would like to communicate the results of this research to a broader audience as an advocate for the need to continue to place a priority on developmentally appropriate education for kindergarten students.

### **Conclusion**

Through this Capstone Project, I experienced extensive growth both personally and professionally as I sought to answer the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?* This project helped to stretch my understanding of who I was as a researcher, writer, and educator. Furthermore, I needed to consider not only how it impacted me personally, but also how it impacted my profession as an educator.

On a personal level, I grew through the entire process of examining and choosing a research question that I was passionate about to the completion of the project itself. The process began with a burning question and ended with a wealth of knowledge that has

helped me grow and strengthened my abilities as a researcher and writer. However, perhaps the greatest personal impact was as a learner. When I became frustrated in the process I learned to rely on others such as my professor, peers, colleagues, and advisors. Education should truly be a collaborative effort and that was at the center of my learning in creating this Capstone Project.

Professionally, I learned to set my biases aside and really let the research and literature be at the center of my project. Initially I was far more focused upon the developmentally appropriate aspect than the academically-oriented approach to answering this question. However, through the research I was able to better understand the benefits of utilizing standards in creating an integrated and balanced literacy curriculum for kindergarten students. It is so easy as an educator to rely on what we already know and the way we have always done things. Through this project, I saw how as an education professional it is imperative to change and grow along with the most up to date research. We cannot do it all as an individual, but if we are open to utilizing what others have learned and willing to make changes, we can truly create the most effective and efficient learning environment for our students.

While it is difficult to summarize all of the learning that has occurred during this Capstone project, if I were to choose one word it would be community. On a personal level, this Capstone is better because of the community of people who supported me and collaborated with me on it. As a professional, I have become a better educator because of the community of researchers and educators who have shared their knowledge and work. My hope is that this project will further their work and will be a significant addition in

improving the quality of education that kindergarteners receive. In seeking to answer the question: *What does a developmentally appropriate literacy curriculum look like in a kindergarten classroom?*, hopefully, I too, have made a significant contribution to the educational community.

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