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Impacts Play Has On The Social, Emotional, And Academic Development Of Children

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IMPACTS PLAY HAS ON THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENTOF CHILDREN

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on understanding the impacts play has on the development of social, emotional, and academic development of children. The foundation of play first starting in kindergarten classrooms, was meant to engage children in meaningful activities that lead to development of the whole child. Over time there was a shift to increase academic readiness and rigor in school. This led to less play-based learning opportunities in classrooms. Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to explore, discover, and have enhanced learning, socially, emotionally, and academically. Educators are the ones to create these opportunities for children. Teacher's need effective strategies to incorporate play in the classroom, such as, variety of experiences and approaches, mentorships to reflect on implementation, making sure there is enough time to play, all while fostering relationships with students. Through providing opportunities for children to learn through play, allows educators to truly build foundations for the whole child.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Looking back to what Kindergarten use to entail, I remember having opportunities to partake in play. We'd play house with our peers, pretend to be superheroes, or pretend we were working our dream jobs as doctors and McDonalds employees. Teachers encouraged us to use our imaginations, and most importantly explore the world around us. We naturally trusted adults, built relationships with our peers, and felt that we could do anything we put our mind to.

Now being a primary teacher myself, I find that when I'm able to integrate opportunities for my students to explore through play, this is when they are naturally motivated to learn. My students are able to have individualized learning experiences, learn to work with peers, learn to communicate their needs, improve their social/emotional skills, and apply what they learned to academics. These are the moments when I'm able to develop not just their cognitive skills, but begin to develop their whole child. As researcher Manning explains, as educators we need to, "examine the value of returning to the roots of our early childhood past…Froebel's philosophy of education" (2005, p. 317).

History of Kindergarten and Play

Friedrich Froebel asked, "What is the purpose of education?" (Manning, 2005, p. 372), which drove his philosophy. Froebel established the very first Kindergarten program in Germany in the 1800's, which included forms of play. Teachers played a key role in his philosophy. Froebel believed it was educators' responsibility to empower students, engage them in exciting playful activities, teach skills that would allow children

to grow and “ultimately be prepared to enter society as a productive member” (Manning, 2005, p. 372). For children, with their multiple needs, Froebel acknowledged a variety of learning styles and explained that through play, educators could guide children to discover and learn.

Following Froebel’s philosophy, researchers Keung and Cheung (2019) explored areas of play-based learning and development of the whole child. In Hong Kong, Keung and Cheung studied kindergarten teachers’ concepts of effective play-based learning and whole-child development, and gathered participants' perceptions regarding the contributing factors of developing play-based learning (2019). A total of 50 kindergarten teachers participated in the implementation of a play-based curriculum plan. The guide these kindergarten teachers used was child-centered, addressed the importance of play, and required the provision of sufficient play practice time (2019). Data was collected through two years of questionnaires and interviews with teachers, head teachers and principals.

The questionnaire aimed to collect the teachers’ views about development and implementation of play-based learning in authentic classroom settings, it covered personal information, factors affecting the effectiveness of play-based learning development, impact on children’s learning and development, factors affecting play-based pedagogy implementation, future development and professional support needs (Keung & Cheung, 2019). All questions utilized a six-point Likert scale from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). The interview data was to search for themes of how effective play-based learning is understood by Hong Kong teachers, and principals

(Keung & Cheung, 2019). Three themes were identified from the interview analysis: articulating play pedagogy, building a reflective and collaborative culture, and involving parents in children's play.

Keung and Cheung formed two results; quantitatively, they found that teachers' enactment of play pedagogy is the most effective factor in play-based implementation, while qualitatively they indicated that the whole person development of children is enhanced when parents are involved with their child's learning (2019). Also, that collaborative culture within schools presume a positive effect on teachers' enactments of play pedagogy and facilitation of home-school cooperation. Combining these findings, Keung and Cheung, explain it enriches our understanding of factors that facilitate play-based learning, and how fostering support of parents, allows more effective ways of supporting childrens' whole development (2019).

Now knowing that play-based learning in hand with support from parents, is effective to developing the whole child, it's interesting to see that kindergarten has increased in rigor and focus on academics, and turned away from play-based learning in the classroom. Bassok, Latham, and Rorem (2016) studied to fill gaps on how public-school kindergarten has changed over time through dimensions between 1998 and 2010 and to see if kindergarten in 2010 is now the new first grade from the late 1990's. This survey was compiled of five dimensions being analyzed: *School Readiness Beliefs and Kindergarten Expectations*, *Curricular Focus and Time Use*, *Classroom Setup and Materials*, *Pedagogical Approach*, and *Assessment Practices.*

As comparing data from 1998 and 2010, Bassok et al. (2016) discovered that it is important to note there was a change of half day kindergarten to full day by 2010. From this problem, they were able to then look at first grade in 1999 and identify what skills weren't taught in kindergarten in 1998, and see if they were now taught in kindergarten 2010.

The results Bassok et al. found were that the overall data displayed that public-school kindergarten classrooms did in fact become increasingly similar in the aspect of structure to a first-grade classroom in 1999 (2016). They also identified that there has been a large change in the challenging components of literacy and math content in kindergarten in 2010.

Knowing the history of kindergarten and play, understanding through Keung and Cheung's study that play supports development of the whole child, and that Bassok et al. validates that kindergarten has indeed changed to be more rigorous, what do we do now? What is the purpose primary of education?

For my thesis, I have decided to focus on three research questions. First, what is play and what types can be used in the classroom? Next, does play impact academic and social/emotional development of children? Last, what do teacher's need to know or do when implementing play into the classroom? Through these research questions I hope to discover that play can be used to benefit the development of the whole child.

Key Terms

Through this thesis the terms “early childhood” and “primary students” will be used. It is important to understand the use of these words throughout this thesis.

The term “early childhood” refers to children birth through preschool. The term “primary students” refers to kindergarten through second grade. In this paper, the use of “early childhood” will at times also refer to the primary grade students.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

To locate the literature for this thesis, searches of Educator's Reference Complete, Expanded Academic ASAP, Education Journals, ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and EBSCO MegaFILE were conducted for publications from 1980-2019. This list was narrowed by only reviewing published empirical studies from peer-reviewed journals that focused on early childhood education and play-based learning. The key words that were used in these searches included "learning through play," "early childhood play", and "impacts of play". The structure of this chapter is to review the literature on play in three sections in this order: Defining Types of Play, Impacts of Play, and Teachers role to implement play.

Defining Play

In, *The Elements of Play*, Eberle identified how "play" has a variety of meanings and definitions, and how multiple experts have concluded that "play" is hard to define (2014). Eberle acknowledged that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (O.E.D) presents extensively a definition and uses of the word play, and that other experts agreed that the definitions of play are, at this point, fruitless. He went on to explore if play needs defining, what is play, and how do we define it, and comes to identify and explain six elements that unfold into play. The elements, which Eberle presents in his article, are considered basic elements that can be seen in every form of play, and suggested that they be used as a guide in defining play.

The first element “anticipation” is where play begins. Anticipation is something we look forward to and prepare ourselves for. The act of play begins with a disposition to play and is a state of readiness, of anticipation, whether mild or intense, and as it makes way for play feels rewarding (Eberle, 2014).

The second element is “surprise”, a reward we must first be prepared to appreciate (Eberle, 2014). Eberle provides the example of peekaboo as a game of anticipation that turns to the element of surprise.

“Pleasure” is the third element Eberle identifies as the keystone function that is a defining trait and an incentive to play some more (2014). This element happens as we play, and mixes with the other elements. Pleasure is where satisfaction grows into joy, happiness, delight, fun, and is because it offers its own reward of play that perpetuates itself (Eberle, 2014). However, pleasure is mostly momentary, and is simply part of a process, but does drive play.

Next is “understanding”, the fourth element, which represents the social emotional aspect of play. Understanding develops our emotional and intellectual abilities that enlarge our talent for empathy and capacity for insight (Eberle, 2014). Eberle identifies that understanding deepens children’s ability to learn to play together, which makes the play richer, more complex, and more pleasurable (2014).

Fifth, the element of “strength”, means to form mastery and control of players minds. Eberle provides examples to conclude that strength is more than physical, but mental abilities to strengthen children’s social relationships. To contribute to play, children use strength to drive their play (Eberle, 2014).

The last element is when play adds understanding to strength, then comes "poise", the end of play. Eberle explains that poise is displayed through dignity, ease, contentment, fulfillment, spontaneity, and balance, a well-rounded person of play (2014).

Eberle (2014) draws his conclusion to the six elements of play as pieces of defining play. Although no direct definition was given, he states that play has resisted a definition because it is difficult to provide dynamic relationships into language. Also, Eberle delivers a proposal of an ongoing rolling definition that, "play is 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" (2014, p. 231). Educators should look at play as an unfolding of a series of fortunate events that is driven by emotional experiences (Eberle, 2014).

Types of Play

Play being able to be implemented in a variety of ways leaves educators in a challenging position. The questions, "where to start?" and "when to use what type of play?" are commonly asked. Researcher's Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, and Golinkoff (2013), studied free play, guided play, and direct instruction play through shape knowledge of preschool children to see what play demonstrates mathematical understandings in geometry.

Fisher et al. (2013) aimed to prove guided play would show improved understanding of the standard features of geometric shapes more than free play or

direct instruction groups. They recruited 60, four to five-year old children from upper and middle class families, in Philadelphia, who were divided equally among three conditions: guided play, didactic instruction and free play (Fisher et al., 2013). The shapes used for this study were triangles, rectangles, pentagons, and hexagons, and each shape was presented in formats of typical, atypical, and non-valid displays. These shapes were displayed on laminated cards and on a felt board. Also, multiple sizes of sticks were utilized to construct the shapes.

Through the study the guided play group was taught definition properties for each of the four shapes in a playful and exploratory manner (Fisher et al., 2013). The experimenter supported students in uncovering the shapes features through questions and hands on exploration time. The children were then asked to use sticks to construct two new shapes and describe how they were similar to the shapes seen on the cards (Fisher et al., 2013). The didactic instruction group differed only by the children engaging through watching and listening only versus actively engaging in the guided play group. Lastly, the experimenter of the free play group organized the cards in one group by shape on the felt board, then the children were given seven minutes to play with the shapes and six minutes to play with the construction sticks in any way they wished (Fisher et al., 2013). All groups also participated in a shape-sorting task where they were asked to sort real shapes and fake shapes into two different boxes which were all based on the four geometric shapes they'd just learned about.

After a week's time, 51 children returned for a second assessment to recall the activities from last time and asked to sort the shapes again. The researchers conducted

an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine the impact of pedagogy on children's definitional learning of shapes and whether shape categories had an impact on children's learning of shapes (Fisher et al., 2013).

Results from Fisher et al.'s (2013) research explained that guided play demonstrated improved definitional learning of shapes, and these children maintained their learning after a week of no intervention. The children in didactic instruction (direct instruction/play) displayed concrete knowledge of shapes, but directed children's attention to the defining features of the shapes. Lastly, free play, showed highly rigid shape concepts. Fisher et al. (2013) go on to share that each form of play has its own benefits and weaknesses, but that through scaffolding techniques, they will heighten children's engagement, direct their attention and exploration, and facilitate their sense making processes for learning.

Research like Fisher et al. is important to study multiple forms of play in the classroom and their outcomes, it is also important to explore their uses and impacts on children's whole development. The forms of free play, guided play, and teacher-directed play/instruction will be address in this thesis.

Free Play. Free play revolves around the child's choice, where they control what is explored and how. According to Ginsburg (2007), undirected play, or free play, is play that allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. He also states that when play is allowed to be child-centered, they practice these skills at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and engage fully in passions they wish to pursue.

Lillemyr, Sobstad, Mmarder, and Flowerday (2011) aimed to find what motivated third and fourth grade students in terms of play, more specifically did they prefer directed play or free play. This was through studying six differing socio-cultural groups from students around the world such as, Australia, Norway, and the United States (Lillemyr et al., 2011).

Their findings from around the world showed that free play motivated the students more in all groups of students, no matter their cultural background. Lillemyr et al. (2011) explained that this study also displayed the social aspect and relatedness is a fundamental need for students to be motivated to impact their learning. They conclude that their findings show a need for free play for eight to ten-year olds in upper elementary. This is because it involves children in social interactions that lead to rich experiences that ignite creativity, experimentation, and learning (Lillemyr et al., 2011). It is suggested that educators who do include a reasonable amount of this play, as well as guided play in the classroom, promote involvement in learning and increase intrinsic motivation of students (Lillemyr et al., 2011).

Guided Play. Weisberg, Kittredge, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Klahr (2015) explained a clear identification of what successful guided play is. They defined guided play as adults structuring the play environment with scaffolding, while the children maintain control within the environment and directs the exploration.

In Van Oers and Duijkers study, they compared two approaches to teaching young children, direct-instruction (Piramide) and play-based approach (Developmental Education Program) (2013). Data was collected from primary classrooms in the

Netherlands, that spent the same time per week on vocabulary learning activities. The Piramide program (direct-instruction) combined teacher and children initiatives in learning that schedules free play time, independent learning, and work with the teacher. While the Developmental Education program consisted of activities in which the children and teacher are involved and carry different roles throughout.

Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) carried out the study investigating vocabulary learning in two classrooms of four to six year olds. One classroom being the teacher driven approach (Piramide program) that the teacher was directive with instruction, and the other being the play-based approach where the teacher served as a coach and supporter to the students' actions. Both programs of implementation were similar besides the timeline of each theme, Piramide ran on a three-week schedule and the Developmental Education worked on a six-week schedule per theme. Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) utilized numbers of new words (26) the students learned to make the two programs comparable for this study. All students were pre-tested during first week of study, then participated in classroom projects for three weeks, and then were given a post-test to measure the mastery of the theme-related target words. Although on different themes, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) used the same procedure when assessing the active use of the target word, and inviting children to tell more about the meaning of the word (semantic network).

Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) analyzed the data and found that performances from the Developmental Education program were better than those of the Piramide program both for active and passive vocabulary mastery. They also explained that

semantic networks for target words showed that students of the Developmental Education program were significantly greater than the Piramide program. Together, Duijkers and Van Oer (2013) concluded that children in the play-based approach group learned significantly more than those of the teacher-directed group, due to the ability for the children to practice and use the words in child-based activities. Both researchers also concluded that the data they found suggests concepts of learning can indeed be developed to allow goal-directed teaching and learning by children through role-play under the guidance of knowledgeable peers or adults (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Their research also supports that play-based curriculum allows children to learn more words with richer semantic content than a teacher-driven curriculum (2013). From observation and analysis, the teacher driven curriculum did allow growth to be made, but stopped when the work was finished and was not transferred for further exploration or out of school situations. The play-based program, in contrast, shows children developed the words as a tool for communication and joint exploration and regulation of the activities due to emerging through the activities itself (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Summing up the research, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) saw their study as giving support to the concept of play being a format of activities that allow some freedom to the players, supports awareness of rules, stimulates authentic engagement, and that play is a promising concept of meaningful learning and teaching for children.

Teacher Directed Play. Teacher-directed play is when the context and play scenarios are controlled by the teacher who has predetermined outcomes. Wickstrom, Pyle, and DeLuca (2019) not only found benefits of free and guided play, but also on

teacher directed play to support mathematical learning for children in kindergarten. Their study analyzed integration of all play and if it was effective in supporting mathematical learning. Twenty teachers who taught kindergarten from two public school districts and one independent school in Ontario, Canada participated in the study. Wickstrom et al. (2019), used observations, photographs, videos and field notes with support of two research assistants that concluded to be 140 hours of data. Structure of the observations consisted of instructional periods where the teacher was directing whole group activities and play based activities.

When analyzing the data, Wickstrom et al. (2019), coded items by orientation of activities (play or teacher-directed instruction) and control over learning (child, shared, teacher controlled). They then developed four pedagogies: child controlled (free-play), shared control (guided play), and teacher controlled (teacher directed play, and direct instruction) which were then classified into two categories of play and direct instruction (Wickstrom et al., 2019).

The results of Wickstrom et al.'s (2019) study displayed that within each of the classes instances of mathematics teaching and learning were identified, meaning play was effective. Of twenty classrooms, 160 incidences of math learning occurred (71 percent was play and 29 percent was direct instruction), which meant the teacher primarily used play as the learning context to support the learning of math (Wickstrom et al., 2019). Free play was observed in all classrooms with minimal evidence that math learning was present in this type of play. Guided play was observed in many of the 20 classrooms, with only some evidence of math learning occurring (38 guided play).

Teacher-Directed play was the most frequently observed type of play in 62 incidences, while Direct Instruction was observed 29 percent of the 160 incidences of math learning. Wickstrom et al. (2019), also identified that majority of the incidences were teacher controlled (68 percent), then shared control (24 percent), and lastly child-controlled (eight percent). The conclusion Wickstrom et al. (2019) stated was play was the primary context in which math was observed, but most of the play took place in teacher-directed versus guided play.

Impacts of Play

Play does many things, such as contribute to healthy child development. Ginsburg (2007), as mentioned earlier, explained in the *Pediatrics* article that play is essential to cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of children. He goes to share that by incorporating play into the school environment activates not only cognitive skills, but social and emotional as well, which helps enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills (Ginsburg, 2007).

The importance of creating opportunities for children to engage in play activities daily is found to provide rich possibilities for children's learning experiences, academically and socially. This is what researcher's Breathnach, Danby, and O'Gorman (2017) found. Their study investigated 25 kindergarten students from Brisbane, Australia and explored their perspectives about activities they value at school (2017). This classroom that was studied consisted of one teacher who was committed to incorporating play-based curriculum with the academic curriculum guidelines, and two part-time teacher assistants. Within this classroom there was a time called, 'inside play'

that consisted of opportunities for children to discuss with peers and adults' access to resources, spaces in the classroom, and partnerships of their choice that took place for an hour two to three days a week (Breathnach et al., 2017).

Children had access to craft materials, books, blocks, dress up attire, and commercial toys, and were able to self-engage in these activities. Breathnach et al. (2017) did note from observations, that sometimes in this 'inside play' time would also consist of some teacher-directed activities.

The findings from observations and interviews by Breathnach et al. (2017) were that the children often identify activities as play or work based on the presence of an adult or location of the activity. More specifically the findings were identified that children frame their activities within adult agendas (organization of physical space and time management), which impacts their perspective if an activity is work or play. Also, that children value agentic opportunities in classroom activities, meaning if the children were asked to do an activity during 'inside play' they still responded with a positive outlook on the activity. Lastly, the research from Breathnach et al. (2017) identified that children initiate self-described 'work' practices.

Social and Emotional

Play in the form of pretending, is one type of play that impacts children's social and emotional development according to Goldstein and Lerner (2018). In their study, *Dramatic Pretend Play Games Uniquely Improve Emotional Control in Young Children,* they conducted a randomized component control trial of dramatic pretend play games (DPPG) with 97 children who were four to five years old, exploring whether this practice

improves multiple social and emotional developments (2018). The children and their families background were considered low income and needed to qualify for the local Chinatown Head Start program. The entire intervention was a total of 24, 30 minute, sessions that took place three times a week for a consecutive eight weeks. Goldstein and Lerner (2018) also utilized Group leader researchers and experimenters throughout this study. The two roles were purposefully blind to the hypothesis of the study and separate from one another's study.

The children were randomly assigned to receive one of the three different types of guided play, as well as being randomly assigned one of the three types of intervention. First what took place in the study was the children being provided with paper and crayons, and told to draw whatever they wanted, to transition them away from their standard preschool schedule and into the intervention period (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018). Group leaders would then run the play group which entailed three activities/stories per day and were different each day (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018). The play groups were Dramatic pretend play games (consisted of a short easy activity followed by two longer complex activities), Block building (consisted of a short simple build followed by two guided builds with a complex goal that was guided by pictures of each major step of the build), and Story time (consisted of children being read three to four different books while being asked questions regarding colors, plot, or activities related to the book) (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018). Through the play group process, each Group leader had specific directions to follow as well as working with a 20-minute time frame. Research by Goldstein and Lerner (2018) also tested in an individual setting by

experimenters in the areas of Theory of mind, Altruism, Live distress response and comforting, Helping behaviors, and Emotion matching. Experimenter's also rated the children on a ten-point scale in the area of participation and enthusiasm separately.

The results Goldstein and Lerner (2018) found was that for low SES four-year old children, dramatic pretend play games was an impactful tool for increasing emotional control skills. In all areas tested the children remained or grew in the neutral zone or positive zone of control.

In the study led by Szumski et al. (2016) it was shown that implementing a program known as, *Play Time/Social Time*, which involved guided play, positively impacted the social development of a variety of children three to five years old. They also studied if there was any difference how it impacts children with disabilities, without disabilities, and/or low social skills.

Participants in the study consisted of 14 preschools in the suburbs of Warsaw, Poland and studied 196 children who consisted of normal development, low social skills, and/or a disability (autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disorders, and physical/sensory). Teacher's took part in a training prior to implementation of the program, and were to identify children to partake in the study who fit the criteria of having normal development of "proper behavior", a disability, or have low social skills. Implementation of PTST took place with 100 lessons on almost a daily basis by the trained teachers (Szumski et al., 2016).

The children were evaluated on their social skills and the impact implementation of *Play Time/Social Time* while using the Teacher's Impression Scale. This tool consisted

of 16 statements on a five-point Likert scale, one meant the child does not display the given behavior, and a five meant the child often displays the given behavior. Teachers were asked to fill the scale out three times during the implementation of PTST (before the start of the program, after the second phase of the program, and at the end of the program) (Szumski et al., 2016).

Researcher's Szumski et al. (2016), were able to show that with implementation of the PTST program in preschools with children three to five years old, there was growth in all areas of improving their social skills. Children without disabilities started at an average score of 66 out of 80 and ended the program at 75 out of 80, a growth of nine points. The children identified with a disability averaged a 37 out of 80e with a growth of ten points by the end of implementation, while children with low social skills and no disability began at 37 out of 80 and completed with the largest growth of 24 points. Researcher's Szumski et al. (2016), identified that a reason for effectiveness of the program is that the teacher's in this study committed to high consistency of the daily lessons.

Levine and Ducharme (2013) explained that through the use of teacher-child play sessions children with behaviors were able to increase their compliance and demonstrate better cooperation. They explored effects of teacher-child play sessions with preschool-children looking at their compliance with teacher requests. Specifically, they sought if teacher-child play sessions would increase the children's compliance to teacher requests and if they increased compliance would they maintain it after the sessions were withdrawn? After screening daycares across Southern Ontario, Canada,

they concluded with eight children and five child care teachers from five classrooms and five centers to participate in the study (Levine & Ducharme, 2013).

Implementation of the teacher-child play intervention required a baseline to be collected of child compliance to teacher requests within ten seconds of the request and completion of the response within 40 seconds (Levine & Ducharme, 2013). Also, the teacher was to involve in five minute daily one on one play activities with the participating child. The child was to lead the play and the teacher was to incorporate the following behaviors in the time frame: praise, responsiveness, mirroring, creating success opportunities, acquiescence, and non-directedness (Levine & Ducharme, 2013). These were identified as essential elements for each teacher-child play session. These sessions took place in the classroom during designated free play periods, and the teacher was to approach the child to request to join play with them, and terminated after five minutes (Levine & Ducharme, 2013). The design Levine and Ducharme (2013) followed was to implement play sessions daily, then withdraw and see if the compliance improvements maintained. If the improvement did not maintain, a second phase of play was introduced, and followed by a fading of the play phase to see if compliance could be re-established or maintained after the intervention was reintroduced (Levine & Ducharme, 2013). Prior to the intervention being implemented, teachers were also trained by Levine and Ducharme, on procedures for requesting to play and play sessions.

Levine and Ducharme (2013) found through their conducted study that daily teacher-child play sessions did increase the levels of child compliance, and those

children who declined after withdrawal of the play session were able to re-establish compliance after play-fading phase was implemented. The improved rates of compliance were consistent no matter the difficulty of behaviors prior to intervention, age, gender, of the children, they all improved compliance within or above normative levels (Levine & Ducharme, 2013). The study explained that teachers were able to interact with students consistently involving praise, warmth and responsiveness, which enhanced the participating children's motivation to demonstrate compliance and cooperation. Utilizing play, Levine and Ducharme (2013) conclude that by simply altering the way in which teachers interact with their students, even for a few minutes each day, they're able to decrease the compliance difficulties they encounter, which creates a classroom environment that promotes and sustains children's pro-social behavior and improves their cooperation.

Academic – Mathematics

To balance the use of play while supporting academic areas, such as math, researcher's below utilized games, guided play scenarios, and block play. Researcher's Vogt, Hauser, Stebler, Rechsteiner, and Urech (2018) looked at which approaches led to mathematical learning gains in a kindergarten classroom. Their study explored how a play-based approach compares to a training program regarding mathematical learning gains in kindergarten classrooms in Switzerland, if there were different effects for children with different needs, and educators' experiences with and views on the two approaches studied (2018). They also identified that their study, unlike others, consisted of a control group that carried on mathematical instruction as usual. The training

program consisted of 24 30-minute units, that were educator-led with a small group of children utilizing specific tasks, math talks, and materials. The play-based approach used cards and board games to match the curricular content of the training program (comparing quantities, counting, number recognition, and part-and-whole relationship) and also consisted 24 30- minute units where all the children participated in small groups after the educator introduced the games (Vogt et al., 2018).

All kindergarten in Canton of St. Gall in Switzerland, were contacted randomly to participate in this study. They were then randomly assigned to one of the groups Vogt et al.'s (2018) sample included 12 kindergarten educators and 111 children in the training program, eleven educators and 91 children in the play-based approach, and 12 educators and 127 children in the control group.

Data in relation to the children's learning gains displayed that there was a higher learning gain for the play-based intervention when compared to the training program and control group, however all still had growth over the implementation period. Vogt et al. (2018) also divided the children into competency levels from a pretest and learned the lowest level of children made the most learning gains from the training program when compared to the control group. From the interviews, the researchers found that ten of the 11 educators' experiences and views supported the play-based intervention, and five of the 12 would implement the training program again. In all, Vogt et al.'s (2018) showed through their study that from eight weeks of interventions, play-based showed high learning outcomes when compared to traditional approaches in the area of mathematical learning. They go on to share that the play used in this approach was

guided play through card and board games, and that this approach served all children in mathematical learning gains, while the training program served children with low competency skills only.

In Park, Chae, and Boyd's (2008) study, children's engagement in play with wooden unit blocks enhanced their mathematical learning through a balance of free and guided play. They conducted interviews with two boys who were 6 (Tony) and 7 (Corey) years old, where both families had limited economic resources, and neither attended preschool (Park et al., 2008). Prior to the interview, the children were able to participate in free-play with the wooden blocks so that they'd become familiar with the pieces. The researcher's also collected background information on the children regarding communication skills, attention spans, and current math skills (Park et al., 2008).

The two tasks the children were asked to complete were to fill the outlined diagram of a car and/or house with blocks utilizing one of the four sets of blocks that included extra pieces. The shapes available were a variety of sizes and types of triangles, rectangles, and squares. Tony and Corey were interviewed independently on the same day, doing the same tasks. Tony filled the car diagram first and took a half-hour break to then resume to complete the house diagram. Corey on the other hand complete the tasks without a break. Each task and interview took about 15 to 20-minutes and was recorded for further analysis (Park et al., 2008). Park et al. (2008) utilized the video recordings to develop thematic categories of mathematical actions by the children.

After analysis, Park et al. (2008), found three major mathematical actions that children performed when completing the block tasks. First that children categorized the

block pieces according to their geometric shapes and both were able to label the pieces as geometric shapes. Second, when Park et al. (2008) provided a variety of block sets to fill out the outlined diagram, Tony and Corey were both able to use the shapes to compose together to make bigger pieces. The last action the children took was learning to manipulate the blocks through turning and flipping to compose desired shapes to complete the diagram task.

In all, Park et al. (2008), stated that their findings suggest allowing children to engage in free-exploration of the blocks is what allowed them to first engage in mathematical actions, concepts and relate objects to their personal knowledge before guidance from the researcher's took place. This block play task and session provided chances of not only play, but chances to count, compare, measure, and reason with the block manipulatives. Park et al. (2008) identified that this is because the blocks are providing open-ended learning, meaning there is not only one way to use them and that each child is able to interact with them in their own way.

Academic – Literacy

Researcher's Elliott and Olliff (2008) began their study by acknowledging young children are expected to acquire many skills prior to kindergarten, and that has led to pre-reading and writing skills being one of the many focus areas for early childhood educators. This led to their researching focusing on using play as a tool to enhance playful learning opportunities to emerge literacy and letter recognition skills. The curriculum implemented was the Early Literacy and Learning Model (ELLM), which was designed to improve language and pre-literacy skills for children of three to five years

old. This ELLM curriculum focuses on six emergent concepts: read aloud, independent reading, oral language, phonological awareness, letter and sound knowledge, and development of print concepts, that promote rich literacy environments at school and home (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). At school the classrooms included word walls, and centers that include letter, listening and writing, as well as packets to accompany the literature. To support the home literacy, teachers provided opportunities for home activities such as lending books to be brought home and providing them questions to ask their children at home.

For this study, Elliott and Olliff, with support from the teacher's, adapted the activities to be used with two to three-year olds (2008). Implementing the ELLM curriculum and adapting it for two to three-year olds, the goal was to emphasize engaging children in multiple opportunities for advancement of emergent literacy skills development (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). These activities differed from the typical checking in and participating in skill-building tasks, but instead the children would play and actively interact in centers that integrated skill development (literacy, social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive) (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). Some of the adaptations that support two to three-year olds was shortening the circle time and downsizing the group size to four to five children at a time. This allowed teachers to have the ability to guide the children in emergent literacy play to their specific needs. Activities designed for these children included use of themed units, manipulatives, self-constructed artifact, real world applications, and home activity packets (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). An example Elliott and Olliff (2008) provided was reading the story *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and utilizing

felt caterpillars with the children's names where the children could manipulate the pieces to sequence in order, identify the letters, and even spell their name. There was scaffolding with alphabet presented, word walls, names on a notecard. To involve family, the parents were to address the note on their child's wristband that said, "Ask me about…" to allow families to engage in discussion with their child about literacy activities that day (Elliott & Olliff, 2008).

The teachers in this study were to continuously observe, monitor and assess children to modify activities based on children's progress through the program from September to March. The children were assessed by trained assessors in a one on one setting utilizing the *Alphabet Letter Recognition Inventory* (ALRI) to measure children's emergent literacy development after the ELLM program adapted play activities (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). The three-year olds were given a pre and post-test in letter recognition of both upper- and lower-case letters.

Elliott and Olliff (2008) found that most children who participated in the daily interactive literacy activities demonstrated an increase in letter recognition, and all children continued to be excited and engaged in the emergent literacy activities. Those who didn't gain as much growth in result of the assessment, could indicate their level of developmental readiness (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). Research by Elliott and Olliff (2008) suggests that it is impactful and important to create appropriate engaging activities for children, and when doing so, gains in children's literacy abilities are possible in the way educational reformers are seeking.

With vocabulary playing an important part of literacy development, Han, Moore, Vukelich, and Buell (2010) studied the impacts play has on early vocabulary learning with 49 four to five-year old children attending a Head Start program in a mid-Atlantic state. The children were randomly assigned to one of two groups, either receiving Explicit Instructional Vocabulary Protocol (EIVP) or EIVP + Play (Han et al., 2010). Both groups utilized a trained tutor for 30-minutes twice a week with one tutor per two children, who would follow a protocol for both groups, and the EVIP+Play tutor also used a play script.

Han et al. (2010) selected words for the vocabulary instruction, which came from *First Thousand Words for Children's Beginning Reading,* and differed from the classroom teacher's plans, but matched the themes each week. They selected 16 words, four to be explicitly taught each week, totaling at 64 words over the entire study period. Then the researcher's set a protocol that tutors would consistently follow where they'd read the book and as they came to the target words of the session they'd show the illustration from the book, say the word aloud, ask the children to say the word, tell them what it means using child friendly language, ask the child to tell the definition of the word or repeat it, do a related action or utilize a concrete prop, ask the child to repeat the demonstration, and last if the child was in the EIVP + Play group they would engage the child in dramatic play or use of manipulatives (Han et al., 2010). The purpose of play being added is to heighten the level of context including adult and child-guided play and props to give each target word more meaning.

To measure the children's receptive language, they were tested three times using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT) which involved multiple choice vocabulary questions where the examiner asked them to point to the illustration that represents the target vocabulary word (Han et al., 2010). Also, Han and colleagues used the Individual Growth and Development Indicator: Picture Naming assessment to measure the children's ability to name pictures rapidly, and to measure their learning of the target words in the intervention groups they used a curriculum-based measurement to monitor the EIVP/+ Play effectiveness of helping children learn vocabulary words.

Results Han et al. (2010) found was that when comparing picture-naming scores, which represented the expressive vocabulary, both groups made progress, but the EIVP + Play group made more significant growth. They also found from comparing the two groups monthly performance through a curriculum-based measurement of mastery of vocabulary words children in the EIVP + Play group showed consistently higher expressive and receptive vocabulary gains over time (2010). This research concludes that blending science-based reading strategies with a play-based approach was responsible for the gains children made in this study (Han et al., 2010). Han and colleagues also go to prove that EVIP + Play was able to move more than 60 percent of children from originally being assessed as at-risk to ending the study within age-appropriate scores. These findings lead Han et al. (2010) to state that play-based learning and guided play actively engage children in pleasurable and seemingly spontaneous exploration and learning.

In the study, *The Play-Literacy Interface in Full-Day Kindergarten Classrooms*, research by Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk (2018) had three goals of analyzing integration of literacy instruction and play based learning, to be able to describe if and how play is used to support development of children's literacy skills, and to build a theory that connects the disconnect between academic and developmental orientations. They had participants from 12 of Ontario's full-day kindergarten classrooms in two school districts. These teachers shared interest in partaking in the study and had a minimum of ten hours of observation and video recordings on instructional (of literacy concepts) and play periods (integration of literacy behaviors during play) (Pyle et al., 2018). The teachers also participated in an interview which explored their decision making in instruction and perspective on the role of play in learning literacy skills (what aspects of student learning or development are enhanced during play, how is student learning supported during play, and what is the role of play in developing literacy skills and language skills) (Pyle et al., 2018).

Pyle et al. (2018) analyzed the data and classified the teachers into two groups: the play and development group, and integrated play and learning group. The play and development group described play as a way to develop personal and social skills through child-directed play, or free play which was the most observed type in the five of the 12 participating classrooms. It was observed in this type of setting that students did engage in oral language development through building storylines, negotiating peer conflicts, and talking about their play (Pyle et al., 2018). To support specific literacy skills (reading and writing), this group of teachers believed a more direct and individual

instruction approach was needed and not accomplished through free play. The integrated play and learning group, Pyle et al. (2018) uncovered that these teachers believed and implemented developmentally appropriate activities that supported literacy concepts. This involved free play and structured play with the teacher. Through observations, it was seen that reading and writing behaviors were observed with greater frequency when compared to the other group of teachers.

The results Pyle et al. (2018) discovered was that teacher perspectives of the purpose of play in the classroom related to the types of play that were actually implemented, which would either support or not support the integration of literacy skills in the context of play. All teachers, no matter their integration and perspective, identified challenges of integrating literacy skills into play-based learning contexts (Pyle et al., 2018). The main issue teachers had was finding a balance between developing children academically and using the play based pedagogical approach. Researcher's Pyle et al. (2018) found that more research is needed to help teacher's balance teacher directed instruction and play-based learning opportunities.

Teachers Role to Implement Play

The role of a teacher when implementing play in the classroom is commonly found to be challenging. Nolan and Paatsch (2018) identified some of the many tensions a teacher experiences and impacts they have on teachers when implementing play-based learning (PBL). They focused on two teachers (Jane and Pauline) in Victoria, Australia, who valued play supporting children's learning and were introducing a play-based approach as their foundation classroom (2018). Jane and Pauline recently

combined classrooms, equalling 49 children aged five to six-years old in one large space. Nolan and Paatsch (2018) documented the program for a 12-month period, and collected data through interviews (three times a year), and conducted two 2-hour classroom observations.

From analyzing observations and interviews, Nolan and Paatsch (2018) found that adaptations of how teachers worked in their classroom were made such as, resources (needing more and flexibility), organization of the classroom (space and placement), expectations of children's behavior (respect, working with others, responsibility, set boundaries), type of experiences offered (engaging and connective to learning), and ways teachers interact with the large space (child-led or teacher-led). They also found that the main tensions experienced by teachers, that impacted their identity, were accountability that all curricular content was being covered, and legitimization that the valuing of play-based learning is valid for teaching and accepted by the school community. It was also identified that Jane and Pauline found themselves constantly needing to validate their play-based methods due to perspectives of the school community.

These are just some of the many things teachers experience when beginning to implement play in the classroom. Lynch (2015) validates the need Jane and Pauline had to validate their methods to administration by stating teachers do feel pressures from administrators and/or parents to focus on academic goals which lead to limits in play. She continues to support Jane and Pauline's experiences by stating teachers need

effective strategies to incorporate the benefits of play since recent years there's been a steady decrease in devoted playtime in the classroom.

The first thing that teachers can do when implementing play into the classroom is knowing it entails many qualities. Research by Park revealed from her 2019 study that qualities for play entailed sub-qualities of time (duration), diversity (number of constructions), organization, elaboration, imagination, concentration, and variety (number of blocks, shapes of blocks). Within each quality of constructive play teachers have a role to provide plenty of time, encourage and support children to participate, have multiple open-ended materials, provide diverse stories, offer many play experiences, and create a safe environment (Park, 2019). Park (2019) concludes that these qualities enhance constructive play and its sub-qualities, making it high quality, and when teachers do this it makes a positive effect on learning and development of children.

Kirk and Jay (2018) identified a second point of fostering relationships in the classroom to build a safe environment for play and learning to happen. They explored how teachers develop classroom cultures that support kindergarten children's social-emotional development (2018). Data analysis observations provided insight on how students and teachers interacted in natural contexts and the interviews allowed a more in depth understanding of how teachers develop their learning environments to support the kindergarteners' social and emotional development.

Teachers must pay attention to developing that synergy between environment, relationships, and play, which is done by circulation of the room. Circulating the

classroom does two things, one it allows teachers to hear children's conversations and learn how they employ social and emotional strategies in social context, and second, children become familiar with the teacher's interactive presence (Kirk & Jay, 2018). Teachers implementing their presence in child-guided activities allows them to be able to model and scaffold appropriate interactions and responses as needed, which leads to the opportunity of desired social learning and benefit to the children (Kirk & Jay, 2018).

Third, Hunter found that teachers feel best supported through a mentorship program to develop their confidence and abilities in implementing play-based learning successfully in the classroom. In Hunter's study to identify enablers and barriers to successfully implementing Play Based Learning (PBL) in primary schools in New Zealand, she looked at primary teachers who taught students in years zero to two, that were already implementing PBL (two thirds of 40) or were intending to implement it in their classroom. In total Hunter had 40 participants that came from responding to her questionnaire that consisted of learning their experience in teaching, rating of importance for the key aspects of PBL, and their own levels of competency in implementing PBL (Hunter, 2019). The questionnaire also consisted of open-ended questions to gather qualitative data on key themes and exploring in depth personal views.

The results Hunter (2019) gathered from the multiple-choice questionnaire was divided into four areas. The first area scored professional development that was provided to support teachers with implementation of PBL, and 83 percent attended. Of those who attended 36 percent felt exceptionally well prepared to implement PBL,

while 56- percent reported being well prepared or very well prepared to begin implementation (Hunter, 2019). Regarding the second portion of questions around pedagogical statements around play based learning, 86 percent believed that PBL is a child-centered approach, while Hunter found it interesting six percent of the participants agreed that a PBL environment means complete absence of teacher-directed instruction (2019). The third area focused on the importance of the aspects of play based learning, and utilized a Likert scale from zero to four. The number one importance was the teachers having knowledge of child development stages, and that teachers proficiency is an important aspect of PBL. Lastly, the fourth area was in teachers rating their own competency in the aspects of PBL (using a Likert scale of zero to four with confidence). The participating teachers rated highest in knowing the New Zealand Curriculum, and lowest in assessments within the PBL environment.

Hunter's (2019) research concluded that to best support teachers in implementation of PBL is through a type of outside agency to provide regular professional development and/or mentoring. Through support of a mentor (potentially a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behavior- person who works within schools to support teachers with students who have barriers to learning) teachers would develop their own confidence in the key aspects of PBL and strengthen their practice, which could also have a positive impact on the barrier of negative perceptions of PBL from parents and/or community members (Hunter, 2019).

There are many ways to implement and approach play in the classroom, research by Pyle and Bigelow (2015), explain that even three teachers integrating play

into their classroom, did so differently. These kindergarten teachers from Ontario schools, implemented play differently because of their different understandings of play and its purpose. Pyle and Bigelow (2015) uncovered through this study that teachers' roles are informed by their understanding of play, and that each teacher will determine the balance of play and academics differently. Their research supports educators in the beginning steps of negotiating balance between academic learning and developmentally appropriate practices that support development of the whole child (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Summary of Literature

Play is used in a multitude of ways for developing the whole child. Play has a variety of meanings and definitions, which multiple experts have concluded as being hard to define. Eberle (2014) identifies six elements that are able to be seen in every form of play and suggest they be used to guide a starting point to defining play. The six elements include anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise.

There are multiple ways which educators can use play in a classroom. Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, and Golinkoff (2013) studied three types of play through shape knowledge of preschool children to see what play demonstrates mathematical understandings in geometry. They studied free play, guided play, and direct instruction play. While each form of play displayed its benefits, the outcome Fisher et al. (2013) found was that through scaffolding techniques, will heighten children's engagement, gain attention and exploration, and facilitate their sense making process for learning.

The three types of play discussed in this thesis are free play, guided play, and teacher-directed play/instruction. Although each type of play is different from one another, according to research in this thesis they are still considered play that brings a variety of learning opportunities for students in the classroom setting.

First, free play revolves around children-centered choice where they are in control of what is explored and how (Ginsburg, 2007; Lillemyr et al., 2011). Ginsburg stated that allowing children to participate in free play, they learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and learn to self-advocate (2007). Research

by Lillemyr et al. (2011) also found that free play is what motivates students and positively impacts their learning.

The second type of play discussed in this thesis is guided play. Weisberg et al. (2015) defined guided play as adults structuring the play environment with scaffolding, while children maintain control within the environment and direct the exploration. In Van Oers and Duijker's (2013) study, they compared direct instruction and play-based (guided play). They concluded that the play-based group learned significantly more than the direct instruction group due to children being able to practice and use words in child-centered activities.

The third type of play looked at in this thesis is teacher-directed play/instruction. Teacher-directed play is when the context and play scenarios are controlled by the teacher who has predetermined outcomes (Wickstrom et al., 2019). Wickstrom et al. (2019) found that learning does occurs with direct instruction when play is used to support the learning being taught directly.

Play contributes to healthy child development, and Ginsburg explained that play is essential to cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of children (2007). Breathnach et al. (2017) found that to provide rich possibilities for children's learning, academically and socially, educators must create opportunities for children to engage in play activities daily.

Research shows that play can be used to support social and emotional development of children (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018; Levine & Ducharme, 2013; Szumski et al., 2016). Goldstein and Lerner (2018) explored the use of pretend play games, free

play, and discovered it impactful for development of emotional skills in all children. The program, Play Time/Social Time, which was guided play based, displayed positive impacts on social development of children with and without disabilities or low social skills (Szumski et al., 2016). Levine and Ducharme (2013) used teacher-child play sessions with children who displayed behaviors. Ultimately finding the intervention increased compliance through free play, which showed that positive relationships created through play, motivates children to display compliance and cooperation skills, which promotes pro-social behavior in the classroom (Levine & Ducharme, 2013).

Using play with manipulatives led to students' mathematical gains (Park et al., 2008; Vogt et al., 2018). In Vogt et al. (2018) study, they compared a play-based approach to a training program and control group, finding that the use of cards and board games (play-based group) led to the gains' children made. Park et al. (2008) study was similar in that it entailed a manipulative, block, to play and develop mathematical gains. Through block play, children engaged in mathematical actions, and developed math skills through play with the blocks (Park et al., 2008).

Play is multi-dimensional and is used to emerge literacy skills in children (Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Han et al., 2010; Pyle et al., 2018). Elliott and Olliff (2008) acknowledge that young children are expected to acquire many skills prior to kindergarten, which leads to pre-reading and writing being a focus for early childhood educators. Vocabulary is one important part of literacy development, and researcher's Han et al. (2010) studied the impacts play has on early vocabulary learning. Integration of literacy and

play-based learning instruction and how it's used to support development of children's literacy skills was analyzed (Pyle et al., 2018).

Now understanding the studies and research behind play in early childhood and primary classrooms, Lynch (2015) states that teachers need to know effective strategies to incorporate play in the classroom. Through research adaptations and qualities were identified that educators should provide in classroom environments and play (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Park, 2019). Nolan and Paatsch (2018) identified findings that led to adapting resources, organization of classroom, expectations for children's behavior, type of experiences offered, ways for teachers to interact. Park (2019) found that teachers need qualities such as making sure play has enough time, diversity, elaboration, imagination, concentration, and variety. While Kirk and Jay (2018) identified fostering relationships in the classroom which builds a safe environment for play and learning to happen. Research by Hunter (2019) revealed that educators who are supported through mentorships and/or attend professional development successfully implemented PBL in their classroom.

Play has multiple ways to be approached and implemented in classrooms. In Pyle and Bigelow's (2015) study, three teacher's implemented play into their classrooms, and did so differently. They found that teacher's roles are informed by their understanding of play. Pyle and Bigelow state that implementing play-based approaches is developmentally appropriate practice that supports development of the whole child.

Limitations of the Research

In search for literature for this thesis, I concentrated on the research that surrounded early childhood education and play based learning. This research was completed through searches of Educator's Reference Complete, Expanded Academic ASAP, Education Journals, ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and EBSCO MegaFILE from publications in the range of 1980-2019.

Through researching studies for my thesis, I focused on studies from the United States and internationally. This allowed me to get the whole picture of what early childhood education looked like in different parts of the world. I believe that there is value in understanding how education and play is approached and viewed internationally, thus my thesis includes these studies.

For this thesis, I focused on primary grades and the use of play for development of the whole child. The reason I chose to focus on primary learners is because the research found that primary years are the foundation for successful secondary educational journeys. Research also revealed that through play, children best engage in learning through variety of play activities.

While researching, I was able to find articles discussing why play-based learning is important to implement in the primary grades, but I did find it hard to find credible research in the United States, more specifically on how teachers apply this strategy in their classrooms. Much of the research, in the states and internationally, showed common barriers surrounding implementing play into classrooms, such as pressure on

academic standards and time. This is why I chose to look at play-based learning around the world.

Implications for Future Research

For school districts to accept the idea of play-based learning, more research needs to be done on how schools can utilize forms of play to learn, in hand with academic curricula. If more research studies were done to bring realistic and practical ways of implementing play in the classrooms, while still implementing academic curriculum to teach standards, I believe school districts would be more likely to adopt this form of teaching and learning through play.

This also means further research needs to be done to show that teachers need engaging professional development, in-building mentors, and most importantly, time, to implement play-based learning in the classroom with success. I also believe some teachers, administrators, district representatives, and even parents, still need to develop an understanding of what play is, the types of play and how they can be used to promote rich academic and social/emotional learning in the classroom.

Overall, there is a need for continuing research in play-based learning to help transition the educational world to see the benefits to this form of teaching. They will learn to see what play is, how it can be used in a multitude of ways to learn and develop the whole child, and most importantly meet the needs of young learners appropriately.

Implications for Professional Application

Children are born to learn. They learn new skills and build upon them each day. With this in mind, we as educators must value children's desire to learn, understand that this can be done through multiple forms of play, and in doing so will develop the whole child.

This thesis focused on research of different types of play and benefits they can bring to the classroom and children's learning. According to Lillemyr et al. (2011), free play can ignite exploration of what is to come, and we should be providing children with this type of uninterrupted play which will in return increase intrinsic motivation of children. Weisberg et al. (2015) state that guided play allows children to direct the exploration with scaffolding from adults to enhance the play. This means that as educators we should be guiding students while they direct their learning, and by doing so we will create rich learning experiences. Based on Wickstrom et al. (2019) findings, teacher directed play can support learning at times. When to use this form of play is when predetermined outcomes and control by the teacher is necessary. This may happen after free play has occurred or even before, to build upon concepts to be learned. Research shows we as educators should provide a variety of play opportunities to allow children to truly engage in their learning and fully develop. The research reviewed shows us why play-based learning should be an important part of primary classrooms.

We can use this thesis to navigate ways to bring play as a learning tool back into our classrooms. Utilizing the examples of play from this thesis, as well as creating our

own to fit our environments, we can begin to implement more play into our teaching methods. This thesis acknowledges teacher-directed instruction and play is what is used currently, but also encourages us to try to be purposeful in allowing more child-centered free play and guided play.

As educators who set the foundation for our students, we are responsible for finding the balance of when to lead and when to focus on student-led learning. This thesis supports teachers to develop understandings of forms of play, then providing them with information on how to implement play in multiple ways in the classroom. Most importantly, this thesis acknowledges that each teacher has their own understanding of play, and that it will guide their implementation of play in their classrooms. Once teachers feel ready to take the leap in learning and implementing play, we will be ready to reignite engagement of our students and provide them with enhanced learning opportunities. Thus, we will lead to development of the whole child.

Conclusion

Presently, play-based learning rarely exists in classrooms. Currently, children sit quietly to listen to their teacher, complete multiple worksheets, earn iPad time as "play", and have a lack of social emotional skills to cope with their many needs. Educators on the other hand are pressed to meet high academic standards, pushed to follow academic pacing guides that plan out their day to the minute, and must find time to provide impromptu social emotional learning lessons to teach students what behaviors are appropriate in school. This is the reality of school for students, no play beyond the 20 minutes of recess.

Research shows that when implementing play-based learning practices, children are able to learn. Also, it is shown that there are different forms of play to meet a variety of skills and goals in the classroom. These forms of play can impact children cognitively, but also social emotionally and enhance children's problem-solving skills with and without peers. Providing children with the opportunity to learn through play practices allows educators to truly build foundations for the whole child. Play is what children need.

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