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HANDS-ON LEARNING IN PRIMARY GRADES

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY
BRIDGETTE M. MEGEARS

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Bridgette Megears

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APPROVED

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the understanding of hands on learning in the setting of primary grades. Play and exploration is a natural form of learning that students have been doing all their lives. With the available different types of play, each one can be applied to the classroom setting as well. As kindergarten was first designed to be based around play, it is essential to get back to that form of teaching and learning so that educators are more confident about meeting the needs of all young learners. Play-based learning provides a space where students can grow cognitively as well as socially in a setting that feels natural and safe to them. Through the use of hands on learning in primary classrooms, educators of young students are providing students with a solid foundation for their educational careers to come.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Kindergarten: “A world of wonder and discovery.” This should be the motto of every kindergarten classroom. “Researchers and educators know that these playful activities benefit the development of the whole child across social, cognitive, physical, and emotional domains” (White, 2018, p. 5). With all the benefits that play-based learning brings to the classroom, we as educators need to be sure that we are taking the time to include play in our everyday learning environments.

I remember going to kindergarten and having different sensory tubs and play centers. One week, we would pretend to be doctors and the next week we would work in a restaurant. This is where we as students could build relationships and feel part of the real world, even if it was just for pretend.

As a primary grade teacher myself, I find that the most creativity and discovery happens when I give my students time to play. I see large personalities come out of my most shy students. I see relationships being formed between the least likely of friends. I see the light bulbs go on as students begin to make connections between concepts. These are the moments that I cherish as an educator and these are the moments that we as teachers need to be advocates for keeping in the ever-changing world of primary classrooms.

In my classroom, it is my hope that I never lose sight of this. To allow my students the time and space to wonder, explore, and discover through play.

For my thesis, I have decided to focus on three main research questions:

- What is play?
- How does play affect children in the classroom?
- What can teachers do to incorporate more play into their everyday classroom?

As I explore these topics through my literature review and application emphasis, I have two goals. First, I am going to find out different ways that play can be brought into the primary classroom and second, I am going to then take that information a step further by planning practical ways these forms of play can be brought into my own classroom through application of our reading curriculum.

History of Play in Kindergarten

In order to understand the future of kindergarten, one must first look at the history of kindergarten. Kindergarten dates all the way back to the 1830's when Friedrich Froebel established the very first Kindergarten program in Germany. Even then, his views on education were centered around play, games, and toys. He went on to develop the philosophy that kindergarten acted as a transition between "home and school, infancy and childhood." The term kindergarten comes from the two words "Kinder" and "Garten" meaning "children's garden." To create a space for children to grow was the goal. Froebel believed that because children are social creatures, they must go through activity and play in order to experience optimal growth. He believed that learning should move from the concrete form to the more abstract form, therefore, the importance of hands on learning was critical for success (Feeny, Moravcik, Nolte, & Christensen, 2010). Kindergarten was built on the philosophy that children are particularly

malleable at this point in their lives and so there needs to be a focus on character development through forms of play.

Knowing the history behind how kindergarten came to be, it is clear that as time has gone by, it is becoming more questionable as to the purpose that the kindergarten classroom should hold. To many, kindergarten can be marked as the beginning of a child's academic life, which has in turn, caused pressure to increase on getting a jumpstart in the child's educational journey ahead (Little & Vogel, 2016). To others, kindergarten is still a time that should be more social than anything else. Regardless of one's view of what kindergarten should be, it is important to give value and hold true to the reason kindergarten started in the first place which was to provide a space for young children to learn and grow socially through self-exploration and play.

Key Terms

Throughout this thesis, the terms "early childhood" and "primary students" will be used frequently. Although these are often misused as being synonyms of one another, it is important to recognize the difference between them.

The term "early childhood" is referring to children birth through preschool in the school setting. This encompasses the student's academic skills, social skills, and overall cognitive skills during this period in a child's life.

The term "primary student" is referring to students in kindergarten through second grade for the purpose of this paper. In the elementary school setting, primary students are grades K-2 and secondary students are grades 3-5.

Overall, this research is true for all students, however, for the purpose of this particular thesis, the focus is on both early childhood students as well as primary students, therefore the research conducted will not go beyond grade 2.

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 keywords that were used in these searches included "play-based learning," "hands-on learning," "early childhood play," and "history of kindergarten." The structure of this chapter is to review the literature on play in the primary classroom in three sections in this order: Defining Play; Motivations to Grow; and Teacher Role.

Defining "Play"

"Play" can mean many things to many people and it is often a term that has shown difficult to define because of its many forms. Scott Eberle (2014), a writer in the *American Journal of Play*, writes about coming up with a definition for play. He states that even though the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the definition of play five full pages to attempt to define "play," we will never exhaust this topic of coming up with a definition. In his article, Eberle gives a list of six basic elements that occurs in every form of play that we can use to start to define something as play. This list consists of:

1. Anticipation: To anticipate is to look forward to something, be curious about something, and get ready for something. This could be as simple

as a “Ready, set...GO!” or a dealer shuffling a deck of cards before a poker game begins. “Play begins with a disposition to play. This state of readiness, of anticipation, whether mild or intense, already feels rewarding as it makes way for play” (Eberle, 2014, p. 223).

2. Surprise: The element of surprise is something that can be a reward in itself. Eberle talks about the different ways to maintain surprise by keeping play fresh and fair. Having equal chances at success and not necessarily knowing the outcome before it happens is one way that Eberle shares how one can maintain this level of surprise that is desired when playing a game (Eberle, 2014).
3. Pleasure: Eberle refers to pleasure as the “keystone of play.” It is both a defining trait of what play is as well as an incentive to do the play in the first place (Eberle, 2014, p. 223).
4. Understanding: This is the social aspect of play. Working toward empathy, insight, sensitivity, and mutuality. These are gifts one will inherit from play as they interact with others (Eberle, 2014).
5. Strength: This becomes another area hard to define because often strength is thought of in the physical sense. However, “real-life feats of strength require that one must be flexible enough to be resilient, ingenious enough to avoid the rough spots, and lively enough to bend without breaking” (Eberle, 2014, p. 225). Play opens facets to strengthen all of these areas.

6. Poise: This refers to the end result of the play and the reason that people keep playing. Responding gracefully to outcomes, holding your dignity, and finding fulfillment in the activity that has just taken place (Eberle, 2014).

As Eberle gives his six basic elements of play, he also makes it clear that in order for something to be considered play, it must encompass all of these ideas. Even without a straight forward definition for the word “play,” this list gives people things to look for when categorizing something as play.

Types of Play

The concept of play is something that many researchers claim hold great value, although play in the early childhood school setting is consistently being put under a great deal of pressure (Breathnach, Danby, & O’Gorman, 2017). In this 2014 study, Breathnach et al. investigated 25 kindergarten students’ perspectives on different classroom activities within their first year being in an Australian classroom. In this classroom, students had a certain time of the day that they referred to as “Inside play time.” During this time of the day, students were given some time to engage in different activities. Some of these activities were their own choice and thought of on their own while some were more teacher-directed. Breathnach et al. found through their observations and interviews that children often identify activities as play or work based on the presence of an adult or the location of an activity. Whether something was self-chosen or adult-directed, the student’s view of play vs. work changed. For this reason, this particular study concludes by explaining the importance of educators

creating opportunities for children to participate in playful activities through the day in order to support fundamental and foundational academic ideas (Breathnach, Danby, & O’Gorman, 2017).

While Breathnach et al. and many other studies work to prove the importance of play in the classroom, it is also important to investigate the different forms of play that can take place so that teachers can provide their students with real mediums for learning while also enabling children to reach their greatest potentials (Moyles, 1989). The different forms of play that will be addressed in this thesis are free/open play, guided play, and teacher-directed play.

Free/Open Play. Free or open play refers to the type of play that is student chosen as well as student-centered. Dr. Rachel White, a researcher for the Minnesota Children’s Museum, states in *The Power of Play, A Research Summary on Play and Learning*, that

“Having control over the course of one’s own learning, as in free play, promotes desire, motivation, and mastery. Children also learn how to seek out knowledge; play involves exploration, hypothesis testing, and discovery. What is more, all this is done in a safe, anxiety- and risk-free environment where children are free to test the limits of their knowledge and abilities with relatively few repercussions. They learn to have confidence in their ability to solve a problem, and they become resilient in the face of a challenge” (White, 2000, p. 8).

In her study, she looked at all kinds of research to find the correlation of play to developmental learning that takes place. Dr. White points out that play fosters learning as it is engaging to students and therefore a self-motivator.

In another study, *A Multicultural Perspective on Play and Learning in Primary School*, researchers looked at six different social groups of students from around the world. The goal was to find out what motivated students in play and relate that back to their cultural profiles. Did they prefer directed play and learning or more free play and learning? Through this explorative study of just over 1,000 students, they found that free play was favored by the majority of students, regardless of the cultural background they came from (Lillemyr, Sobstad, Marder & Flowerday, 2011). Knowing that overall free play was enjoyed and favored by most students in this study, it is most definitely worth bringing into every classroom as a part of learning as it has been proven to be a motivator. This study also concluded that students had a strong desire to feel a sense of competence and friendship was a strong motivating factor for student participation in school. Lillemyr et al. (2011) suggest including play in learning during early educational years so that this sense of relatedness can be achieved to motivate learning.

In the study led by Breathnach et al. (2017) in a first-year primary classroom in Australia that was previously discussed, children saw this particular type of free/open play as their “Inside play time.” More specifically, when they could choose what to play and who to play with without any teacher direction and

input. What was interesting is that students would often refer to the writing and reading part of the day as being work, which they described as being boring, difficult, obligatory, teacher-directed and typically indoors. However, during inside play time, the students would often choose to do writing and reading activities on their own and they described this time as a time of play, not work. Very similar work was done in both cases, the only difference was that one was asked to do by a teacher and one was chosen to do by the students themselves. For the students, this same work was now fun, at their level, self-chosen and more flexible on where they could be. This desire to do an academic task is laid out in such a way that students see it as play. It is at this moment that educators are provided with “rich opportunities for understanding children’s learning experiences” (Breathnach, Danby, & O’Gorman, 2017, p. 450). Sometimes even the structure of the day can influence the mindset on which the students believe they are working or playing. Whole group and small group time might be work but putting the same task in the “inside play time” part of the day automatically turns that same work into play.

Knowing that all primary students may not choose an academic activity to do during their free time of the day, sometimes a bit of teacher guidance is necessary. This brings up the form of play called “guided play.”

Guided play. Meghan Lynch, a researcher and advocate for play in the classroom, describes guided play as “teachers gently guide play, using play-based teaching and learning activities to promote curricular goals while

maintaining the critically important aspects of play—such as children’s intrinsic motivation to engage in play” (Lynch, 2015, p. 347). In *The Qualities Criteria* study, the teacher’s role in play was looked at in order to enhance the learning in the classroom. This study consisted of 97 kindergarten students in South Korea. These students were split into 20 groups (each consisting of about 5-6 students) where they would participate in a block of play time twice per week. For the first ten minutes of play time, the teacher would give some form of introduction to an activity. For example, one day the teacher read her students the story The Three Little Pigs. The story time would then lead into 30 minutes of constructive play time with blocks and other manipulatives that they could use to build and play as they desired. With plenty of time and a variety of materials to choose from, the researchers found that the students were able to bring to life the story that was just read and even practice the skill of retelling and reenacting the story using the models they have just created. With just a bit of an introduction and plenty of time with materials, the students used this form of guided play to bring to life a classroom read aloud. In conclusion of this study, Park found that the most beneficial way to contribute to students learning and development was for teachers to guide, support, prepare, and encourage students through their time of constructive play (Park, 2019).

Teacher-directed play. Teacher-directed play refers to the type of play where the teacher controls the play scenarios taking place so that they are able to achieve the pre-determined outcomes for their students (Wickstrom, Pyle, &

DeLuca, 2019). In this model of play, the teacher explicitly models a concept, asks direct questions from the students that are designed to prompt desired responses in order to highlight specific knowledge and understanding. This is often the form of play most noted in academic instructional times. For example, in *Does Theory Translate into Practice? An Observational Study of Current Mathematics Pedagogies in Play-Based Kindergarten*, researchers found that in a total of 140 hours of observational data reported from kindergarten classrooms in Ontario, Canada, 68% of the math time observations were teacher-directed. This is interesting considering Ontario has produced a kindergarten program that mandates play as the primary form of pedagogy for meeting the students' needs both academically and developmentally (Wickstrom, Pyle, & DeLuca, 2019). In conclusion to this particular study, it was found that work was still needed to be done in order to bridge the misalignment of theory and practice so that more of the mathematics time was spent in a more guided play setting and therefore less teacher-directed.

On the other hand, in the study, *Kindergarten Children Demonstrating Numeracy Concepts through Drawings and Explanations: Intentional Teaching within Play-based Learning*, by Chigeza and Sorin (2016), one can see the positive side to teacher-directed play in relation to mathematics. In this study, the researchers looked at two groups of students, one from Canada again and one from Australia. The researchers had students draw on one side of a postcard and then explain their drawing while their teacher scribed for them what the drawing was depicting. The researchers found that through the

drawings and scribes, the students were able to show three-dimensional space which is considered a “spatial skill” that is classified as higher-level thinking for these young learners. While this was not the case with every student in the study, the importance is that when directed and led by the teacher through the format of play, students can demonstrate high levels of mathematical learning such as “spatial orientation, attributes of objects, structure of patterns, numbers, measurement, data argumentation, connections and exploration of the world mathematically” (Chigeza & Sorin, 2016, p.69). With all these areas of potential growth in the mathematics setting, one can see the benefits of teacher-guided play as it supports the learners directly.

Motivations to Grow

Play is not simply used to fill time at the end of the day. Play has a strong ability to impact students in a multitude of ways when planned intentionally by teachers. Weisberg and Zosh from the University of Pennsylvania write about the impact that play-based pedagogy can have on a child including social development as well as cognitive development (2018). With all the research conducted on the benefits of play in the classroom, these two motivators behind including play in the classroom are outlined below.

Social Interaction and Language Development

Play brings about many levels of learning to students of all ages and it can be made purposeful in order to do so. In *Purposeful Play*, Mraz, Porcelli, and Tyler (2016) bring a new perspective into making play extremely purposeful in the classroom. These three women bring different perspectives into their book

through their time as classroom teachers, staff developers, authors, and principals. Their goal of this book was to show the importance of play and also share practical ways that play could help bring rigor into the classroom. One thing that they write about is the social aspect of play. The way they accomplished this is by writing about an argument that broke out in one of their classrooms between two young girls. During play time, both girls wanted to play the “mommy” role. They could not agree on who could be the mom and who had to be the baby so they ended up not playing together at all. Later that day they were learning about family dynamics. They learned that a family is made up of people who love you and it does not have to look a certain way. Some families have one mom, some have more than one, and some have no mom at all. This clearly sparked some form of social development in the young girls as during free play time later that day, they both played the role of the mom and they brought in another friend to play the baby (Mraz et al., 2016). The social aspect of what they learned during an instructional part of the day carried through to their free play time and further opened their eyes to a new perspective and also widened their worldview. This related to Vygotsky’s idea of make-believe play fostering student’s ability to self-regulate and create a foundation for other interactions that can lead to learning (Germeroth et al., 2019).

In the study conducted by Mielonen and Paterson, *Developing Literacy through Play*, readers are shown a new perspective of play and social interaction through play in the home environment. The two young girls that were observed in this study had just finished kindergarten together at the same school and they

considered one another to be a friend. It was found through observation that language was the primary form of communication between the two girls. They built on one another's language literacy skills as they would demonstrate and communicate to the friend what they were doing throughout the day. For example, one friend was organizing a shelf of toys while explaining to the other friend how she was doing so. The other friend observed and then was able to later step in and assist her in the organizing process when she had caught on. Another observation between the young girls was observed where one girl was swimming and the other girl was afraid to jump in. She explained to her friend that she was not a good swimmer and was not comfortable doing so. The friend's high expectations for her to swim and the language she used caused her friend to eventually jump in the pool even though she was apprehensive to do so in the first place. The power of convincing words caused the friends to be able to engage socially again as they continued to play in the pool. This study shows the opportunity of literacy learning through social interactions in non-guided play time (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

Cognitively/Academically

Purposeful Play gave some insight into how play benefits students academically. Mraz et al. (2016) stated that meeting standards meant that at the end of the year, students must be at the level that is required for them to have met by that given time. It does not show, however, how to teach because standards are not curriculum. Just as one could walk, drive, or bike to the store, the store is the ultimate endpoint. There are many modes of transportation for

reaching that destination but ultimately, reaching the destination of the store is the only true goal. In education, standards must be met for each grade level, but they do not state that students can only learn in whole group/small group settings. Play is just another mode of learning for students. “Play is a natural learning environment for children, and it is something they have been doing their whole lives before coming to school. Because play is safe and familiar, children feel free to take risks and try on new learning” (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 6).

Purposeful Play gives an example of this sort of risk-taking in a student who was having a hard time composing narratives during the writing part of the day.

However, she was fully able to engage in pretend play by developing much more elaborate story lines with her peers. This proves how “play gives access to higher levels of thinking” because risks are less risky when done so in the much more comfortable setting that is play time (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 6).

Role of the teacher: Now that we know, what do we do?

Primary teachers are often pressured into teaching using more of a direct form of instruction because of rigorous content and standards that must be met and the drive to push students at an earlier age (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). According to Bowden in *The Common Core’s first casualty: Playful learning*, “Developmental psychologists have shown that for young children, play is learning” (Bowden, 2015, p. 33). She points out that in 1998, just 32% of kindergarten classrooms received more than 90 minutes of reading instruction daily, whereas, in 2010, 77% of kindergarten classrooms were doing more than 90 minutes per day. This increase in the amount of time spent teaching reading

is often pressured by the teacher's need to prepare students for standardized testing that takes place beginning in third grade. These percentages are changes that are seen in both high and low poverty schools where procedural learning is now causing a lack of time for experiential, playful learning (Bowden, 2015). Although an increase in instructional time is not always something that can be changed, the form of teaching is something that can be changed. As Meghan Lynch states in her article, *More Play, Please*, in order for change to take place, teachers need to know not only the benefits of play in the classroom but also how to incorporate play into the classroom in order to benefit students (Lynch, 2015).

The first thing teachers should know as they incorporate more play into their classrooms is that this should and will take time. In *The Qualities Criteria* study, research showed the importance of the length of time students need to do an activity in order to reach complex and mature forms of play. "The most essential condition to support constructive play is the child's sense of schedule. Play does not survive when children are being rushed; constructive play must be nurtured by time" (Park, 2019, p. 130). Teachers need to provide students with an adequate amount of time in order to delve into their most creative selves through play. While it is noted in the article *Conceptualizing Play Based Learning*, time is limited. This study conducted by Fesseha and Pyle (2016) of Ontario, where the two surveyed 101 elementary teachers of which the average teaching experience was 13 years with seven of those years taught in a kindergarten setting. The idea of time was identified by 47% of the participants

as being a “moderate to extreme barrier” for implementing play into the classroom because of the high number of academic expectations during the day (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). This can be seen as true if one was to keep play and curriculum as separate entities. However, when brought together, this barrier can be broken down a bit. Combining academic time with play time allows students to engage with both sets of material for longer.

Second, creating spaces for free play in the classroom will help promote social literacy for students. Bringing rich environments for social play such as the dramatic play area is one way to ensure students are given the space to develop their language abilities through meaningful activities that can be seen and applied to the real world as well (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). This form of pretend play impacts students socially, cognitively, and emotionally. Socially, students will learn how to interact with one another in an appropriate and fair manner. Cognitively, students learn how to be creative problem solvers. Emotionally, students are learning to be independent while also learning how to cope and work with other people’s thoughts and feelings that may be different than their own. Interestingly, in White’s research, she states that kindergartener’s vocabulary was also positively impacted as it related directly to the amount of time they spent in pretend play settings speaking with other peers when they were younger (White, 2018).

A third way that teachers can implement play into the classroom is by bringing to life what is being learned. *Learning through play: a review of the evidence*, is an article written by authors of The Lego Foundation. They give the

example in the context of teaching shapes such as the hexagon and the triangle.

While knowing the different attributes of the shapes is important, it is also important to develop some deeper learning in order to “connect factual knowledge with real-world experience so that students can really grasp their implications” (Zosh et al., 2017, p. 9). An example of this would be comparing hexagons to beehives that are shaped in this particular way in order to hold the most honey. Experiments could then be done comparing the hexagon shape to other shapes in holding a concentrated amount of honey or other materials. Likewise, connecting triangles to bridge-building for hinge support brings about a much deeper level of understanding than simply stating that a triangle has 3 sides (Zosh et al., 2017). Students could design bridges using different shape structures to see first-hand the support that the triangle shape provides the structure. Learning in this way allows students to be motivated by their own experiences and also cause them to be curious to learn more about a subject area. They are able to think more flexibly as well which will help with their ability to problem solve in other areas of their lives.

With the many ways that play can be incorporated into the classroom, research simply states the importance of starting somewhere. Play is natural and necessary in order to learn, grow, and thrive. Positive play environments must be supported in order to help promote healthy child development for young learners (Zosh et al., 2017).

CHAPTER III: APPLICATION OF RESEARCH

Evidence-Based Rationale

As academic rigor for primary students has increased dramatically over the years, the amount of pressure on teachers has also increased. This pressure has caused a significant decrease in time spent playing within the classroom for a multitude of reasons including time and pressure from administration (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). The research found in this literature review has shown that students need time in the classroom setting to play. Through free play, guided play, teacher-directed play, students are able to grow both socially and academically in a setting that feels much more natural (Bowdon, 2015; Breathnach et al., 2017; Chigeza & Sorin, 2016; Eberle, 2014; Feeny et al., 2010; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Lillemyr et al., 2011; Lynch, 2015; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; White, 2012; Mraz et al., 2016; Park, 2019; Rogers et al., 2016; Saracho, 2001; Wickstrom et al., 2019). The main goal of this application project is to share research-based projects and ideas teachers can implement using all three forms of play directly into their classroom during literacy instruction in order to maximize learning time.

Explanation of Project

Based on the research around play for this thesis, the project I have designed is a series of three lessons to directly implement into the classroom in order to promote play for primary learners. These particular lessons are designed to be used in a second-grade classroom that uses the Wonders reading curriculum (the specific ideas covered are directly linked with what is being

taught within this particular curriculum) although they can be implemented into just about any primary setting.

The structure of these lesson ideas are developed in a way that meets each form of play that was discussed in the literature review: free/open play, guided play, and teacher-directed play. All three of these lessons are created so that they meet the needs of the learners both socially as well as academically.

The first lesson, Appendix A, focuses on free/open play as discussed in the literature review. This lesson contains anticipation, pleasure, and understanding as described by Scott Eberle (2014). Anticipation comes as students are getting ready for their chance to play, pleasure comes from the play time itself as students have some freedom during the day, and understanding comes from interacting with other peers through their time in the dramatic play area. A dramatic play area gives freedom to the students who are currently there interacting with peers and the materials. This freedom alone gives the students a sense of play and pleasure within the activity (Breathnach et al., 2017; Lillemyr et al., 2011; White, 2000). My goal through this lesson is that students will grow both socially and linguistically. The social development will come through working with other peers and discovering new ways of thinking just as the young girls did in Mraz et al.'s study where they discovered that the meaning of family looks different for different people (2016). Students will grow in their language development as they interact with other students and piggyback off one another's language. This can be seen in the study done in 2009 by Mielonen and Paterson as they show the interaction between the two girls in their home. The more that

students hear one another speak and engage in that conversation, the more they will grow in their own language development.

Next, Appendix B shows Eberle's example of poise and strength. As students are changing the design of their peer's creations, some may have a hard time with the changes that are being made. However, being able to bend without breaking and find fulfillment in the activity itself is something that will be taken away from this lesson (2014). Just as students in *The Qualities Criteria* study built upon what they just heard as a read aloud, this lesson is designed so that students may pick up on the themes found in The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires. Making connections between carpet time and independent time shows that students are able to apply what they have been learning into a new context. This is the purpose behind guided play as teachers gently guide students into accomplishing something while still allowing students their own freedom to make the discoveries on their own (Park, 2019). The goal behind this lesson is to have students grow both socially as well as academically. Social growth will happen through students' interactions with one another as they work to agree upon a design decision for their final share out projects. They will have to work together to share their perspectives as well as work on their listening and teamwork skills as they openly hear the perspectives of others. Doing this could cause them to gain a whole new perspective in itself just as one can see in the study led by Mraz et al. (2016). The academic growth of this lesson is going to be when the students are working on being purposeful in their planning and explaining their "magnificent thing." They will have to explain the "why" behind

their design in a way that makes sense to their peers. This lesson allows the student to feel a sense of ownership over their creations and therefore gives them a safe place to take risks and try something new, as the literature review states is an important component of the learning process (Mraz et al., 2016).

Lastly, the third lesson, Appendix C, connects to Eberle's definition of play through anticipation and pleasure (2014). Anticipation is present when the teacher is working with the play dough. Students may be thinking about themselves being able to enjoy that as well. Pleasure is seen when students are working with the dough and developing their own animals. Playdough is such an engaging tool to use in primary grades so even the smallest amount has the ability to bring pleasure into a lesson. It is in lessons such as this and *Kindergarten Children Demonstrating Numeracy Concepts through Drawings and Explanations: Intentional Teaching within Play-based Learning* that students are able to reach far greater amounts of understanding through their learning time. In the study led by Chigeza and Sorin (2016), students were able to make connections that reached beyond their developmental level because of the freedom they were given in the time of play. I created this lesson so that it had enough guidance as well as enough freedom for students to know what was being asked of them while at the same time allowing them to go outside of their comfort zone in a way that still feels safe. The goal within this lesson is to see academic connections being made between what students are sharing out to what was learned throughout the week. I will be looking for vocabulary and other references to materials that we have covered throughout the week.

Although I am looking for a few specific things, students also have the freedom to go beyond that and elaborate on those ideas in this comfortable play style setting (Mraz et al., 2016).

I would love for these lesson plans to be sharable amongst other teachers so that they too may see practical ways of incorporating play into their classroom. To start this sharing, I will share my ideas with our school's literacy specialist so that she may share out to the other 25 elementary schools in the large district that I work for. After implementing these three lessons into the classroom, I would like teachers to gain the following:

1. Experience what play-based learning looks like (Bowdon, 2015; Breathnach et al., 2017; Eberle, 2014; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016)
2. Reflect on how the lessons worked into the content for the week
3. Understand the impact that play has on student's development socially (Lillemyr et al., 2011).
4. Understand the impact that play has on student's development cognitively (Chigeza & Sorin, 2016; Lynch, 2015; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Saracho, 2001; Wickstrom et al., 2019).
5. Feel a bit more confident in creating play-based opportunities for students to learn in the classroom (Mraz et al., 2016; Park, 2019; Rogers et al., 2016).

Necessary Resources

In order for these three lessons to be applied smoothly, it will be necessary to have plenty of space to work in. Depending on the number of

students, any primary classroom setting should work fine, as long as students have the space to work independently at times. These lessons are also all able to be done in an outdoor learning environment as that can sometimes seem more comfortable to students (Breathnach et al., 2017).

In addition to the physical learning space needed for these lessons, students will also need to have play-based learning materials at hand. This list includes but is not limited to coloring utensils, writing utensils, building blocks, books, glue, and craft sticks. The complete list of materials needed for the three lessons can be found in the appendices.

Lastly, students will need adequate amounts of time for each lesson with the freedom of fluctuating from that amount of time. Play is best when students are given time to really explore and engage with the materials (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Park, 2019). The amount of time stated is a guide to how much time the teacher should set aside for their students, however, being that each group of students is unique, so is the amount of time it may take them to become engaged in playful learning. For this reason, it is occasionally noted in the time blocks to extend or decrease the amount of work time based on classroom needs.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Summary of Literature

Play is a fundamental form of learning for young learners. Play itself is something that can be hard to define itself although many researchers have tried. Scott Eberle (2014) came up with a list of indicators that can be used to define play. These indicators include anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. Having these indicators helps to begin to define what play has the potential to look like in the classroom.

Play within the classroom can look different depending on how it is introduced as we see to be true in the case of Breathnach et al. study of 2017. When students were given “inside play time,” they often continued to do academic activities, this time by choice (Breathnach et al., 2017). While students choosing to use their free play time to work on academics sounds great, teachers can also play a role in how they introduce this play time in order to lead students to gain those academic foundations.

The three types of play that are discussed in this thesis are free/open play, guided play, and teacher-directed play. While all three of these types of play are considered play that can be connected to the classroom, each type of play brings about different learning opportunities for primary students.

First, free/open play allows students to investigate their own idea of play and what that looks like for them. As explored by Dr. Rachel White, a researcher for the Minnesota Children’s Museum, this type of play promotes desire, motivation, and mastery for our students. Students are more likely to take risks

in this form of play because there are generally fewer repercussions or fears of doing something wrong (White, 2000). Research has shown that play is something that is desired by students of all ages and social groups so incorporating some of this free play into the classroom can be very beneficial for everyone (Lillemyr et al., 2011).

The second type of play that is discussed in this thesis is guided play. Researcher Megan Lynch describes this form of play as teachers guiding students using play-based learning practices in order to promote curriculum goals (Lynch, 2015). *The Qualities Criteria Study* gives teachers realistic ways of incorporating this form of play into the classroom. Park (2019) states that the most beneficial way of optimizing this form of play is through the teacher's ability to be a guide and support in order to encourage students during their time of play.

The third kind of play that is written about for the purpose of this thesis is the form of play called teacher-directed play. This form of play has predetermined outcomes and the teacher plays a key role in controlling the play that takes place (Wickstrom et al., 2019). This form of play has the opportunity to allow students to reach academic possibilities beyond what was intentionally planned as one can see in the study, *Kindergarten Children Demonstrating Numeracy Concepts through Drawings and Explanations: Intentional Teaching within Play-based Learning*. A well-designed lesson made a space for students to challenge their thinking in a way that was motivating and engaging for them (Chigeza & Sorin, 2016).

With the different types of play being introduced, the motivations behind the play are also identified. In some situations, play brings about more social and linguistical development for students (Mraz et al., 2016; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). These social interactions help students gain a more holistic and complex vocabulary while also promoting friendships and social skills with peers and other adults.

The other, sometimes less obvious, motivator behind play is a student's cognitive or academic development. As teachers are meant to teach in order for students to meet the standards at the end of the year, those standards do not state how the students must learn. It is in this section that one is reminded that play is a valid form of that learning taking place. Play is natural and something that young students have been doing their whole lives so far, incorporating play into the classroom provides a place for students to feel comfortable in making mistakes and trying new things, both of which promote higher levels of learning (Mraz et al., 2016).

After understanding the research behind play in the classroom, the next step for teachers would be the implementation process. Based on the research gathered, play should be implemented into all primary classrooms (Bowden, 2015; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Lynch, 2015; Park, 2019; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; White, 2018; Zosh et al., 2017). This process of bringing play into the classroom includes providing students with the time they need to engage fully in the play (Park, 2019). Park states that in order for students to reach optimal growth, they must have an adequate amount of time and exposure to play. She

further states that play will not survive when students are rushed. Providing time, a rich environment, and connecting learning opportunities with play are all ways that teachers can further reach students through play (Zosh et al., 2017).

Play once held a high place in the classroom and it has continued to be pushed aside for other academics, however, as one can see, research shows and will continue to show the importance of play in our early childhood classrooms (Zosh et al., 2017).

Limitations of the Research

While searching for literature for this thesis, I focused on the research and literature that surrounded early childhood education in connection with play-based learning. This research was conducted through searches of Educator's Reference Complete, Expanded Academic ASAP, Education Journals, ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and EBSCO MegaFILE from publications ranging from 1980-2019.

While researching, I decided to focus on studies done internationally. I chose to do this so that I could get a more holistic look at early childhood education around the world. Although primary schooling looks different from country to country, I believe it is still worth understanding how it is being approached around the world and for this reason, my thesis includes these international studies.

The focus of this thesis is on primary grades and their emphasis on play-based learning. The reason that I chose to primarily focus on these early learners is because of the research found in how young students best learn in a

hands-on environment. Kindergarten, in particular, plays a great role in this thesis because it is the starting point for our primary students as they begin their educational journey. With a solid foundation in these primary grades, students will have a great foundation as they continue through to secondary grades.

While I was able to find countless articles about why play-based learning was important to keep in primary grades, I did find it difficult to find credible sources of research found in the United States on how teachers are applying this pedagogical strategy to their classrooms. Much of the research showed the complications surrounding bringing play into the classroom for reasons such as time, pressure, and standards. This is another reason why I chose to look at play-based learning on an international platform.

Implications for Future Research

Research shows the barriers that exist in bringing play-based learning to classrooms while also sharing the importance of this style of learning. I would like to see more research done on how these barriers can be overcome in our schools.

Based on the research gathered, one can see that standards, time, and needing to prepare for grades to come all play a key role in eliminating play in primary classrooms. If more research was done to bring practical ways of implementing play into these classrooms, I believe more districts may adopt this form of teaching and learning. Play-based learning is a hot topic in our schools today and bringing up these conversations will help get the ball rolling on bringing back this form of developmentally appropriate learning.

Future research could also include studies on parents' perspectives of what school looks like for their children. Many adults grew up with some form of play-based learning as research shows the dramatic shift in teaching strategies within the last 20 years alone. If more parents were aware of what is being expected and taught to their young students, it may also help drive change in schools.

Overall, continued research into play-based learning is needed in order to help guide conversations and bring about change in teaching strategies to help meet the needs of young learners.

Implications for Professional Application

Through this thesis, we are reminded as educators the importance of play for young students. We are reminded that play is natural for children and that natural form of exploration should hold a place of high value in the classroom as well.

This thesis focused on the research of different types of play and the benefits that they can bring to the classroom and learning culture. Through these varieties of practices, children are given multiple forms of play-based learning that they will be able to hold onto in their future educational careers.

Through research in this thesis, we as educators are reminded about why play-based learning should be a part of every primary classroom. This thesis states that students will not only gain a more in-depth academic understanding of materials, they will also develop social and linguistical through play. Each of

these areas that play touches on will help these young students as they explore and learn in the years to come.

We can use this thesis to challenge ourselves to find ways to bring play back into our primary classrooms. Through the many examples that have been laid out as well as any new ideas we come up with on our own, we can start to incorporate more and more play into our learning models. While many teachers may feel confident already in their ability to lead students through teacher-directed play, this thesis encourages them to try to allow more student-led free play. This idea may seem daunting at first but with the research behind this type of play, teachers can feel confident that they are making the right decisions for their students.

As educators, it is our duty to teach and lead in a way that is student-focused. Through this thesis, teachers can feel motivated to lead their classrooms through forms of play so that students feel comfortable and ready to take risks in their learning. Teachers will also feel motivated to lead other educators to begin to do the same. When we are all on the same page about why play is important and we can begin to share ideas on practical ways of incorporating play into the classroom, we will begin to bring back a love for learning for our students so that they may feel motivated to shine that same idea onto others.

Conclusion

Play is a natural form of learning for young students as it is a safe place to take risks and try new things. Research shows how students are able to learn

through a variety of play-based practices. These different forms of play in the classroom have the ability to help students achieve levels of cognitive understanding while at the same time promoting social interaction with peers. Providing students the opportunity to learn through play is something that should be incorporated into all primary classrooms as teachers are working to create a solid foundation for all student's academic careers to come.

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APPENDIX A

Free/Open Play Lesson

This week students have been learning about families around the world and how they celebrate. This lesson brings a playful perspective into learning how students in our own classroom may celebrate in their own families.

Unit/Topic: Unit 1 Week 2 Families Around the World

Lesson Day: To be played throughout the week in dramatic play zone

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will engage with other students collaboratively and socially
- Students will build on the backgrounds of one another
- Students will create artifacts that bring to life a “celebration”

Lesson Structure:

- Students will be given 15-20 minutes per day to engage in the dramatic play area of the room.
- Hang a “CELEBRATE” banner up and place all supplies under it.
- Students may engage in materials how they wish. For example, some may choose to create a craft, others may choose to act out scenarios with peers.
- Change the groups each day so students have a chance to work with other students.

Materials Needed:

- Coloring utensils
- Writing utensils
- Paper products
- Glue
- Craft supply bin (pompoms, pipe cleaner, string, etc.)
- Celebrate banner
- Piñata
- Balloons
- Wrapping paper
- Greeting cards

Time Allotted: 15-20 minutes per day during center rotation time

Why free/open play? The simplicity of this play time is something that I have created so that it can easily be switched out depending on the unit topic.

Allowing students time to gain social skills through play such as this is a great way to encourage friendships and help further language development.

APPENDIX B

Guided Play Lesson

This week students have been learning about how friends depend on one another. This lesson is designed to bring that learning into real life as they are faced with challenges that encourage them to rely on their friends for help.

Unit/Topic: Unit 1 Week 1 Friends Help Friends.

Lesson Day: to be played on digital day 4

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners in small and larger groups.
- Students will build on one another's ideas.

Lesson Structure:

- Divide students into partner pairs
- The teacher will direct "Student 1" to begin building a structure of blocks while "Student 2" is listening to the read-aloud The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires.
- When the read-aloud is finished, "Student 1" will now come over to hear the read-aloud of The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires while "Student 2" continues to build upon "Student 1's" creation.
- After the read-aloud, all students come together in a circle.

- The teacher then assigns each pair of students to a “magnificent thing” in the room (not their own).
- Without touching the structure itself, the pair of students will then work together on coming up with the use of the “magnificent thing” they have been assigned to.
- They will then work together to create a poster writing and illustrating this “magnificent thing” in action.
- After all of the groups have finished, students will come together to share what the structure does.
- The read-aloud that all students have now heard is all about there not being a single way to do something, so we will not be commenting or questioning anyone’s design purpose they came up with. Rather, this time will serve as a time for all students to share openly without being “wrong.”
- We will then discuss as a class how “Student 1” helped start the design, “Student 2” helped by continuing to create the design, and finally how the new set of partners helped by coming up with the meaning behind the design.

Materials Needed:

- The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires
- Building blocks
- Poster paper
- Coloring and writing utensils

Time Allotted: 50 minutes

- 5 minutes for read-aloud group 1 (while others are building)
- 5 minutes for read-aloud group 2 (while others are building)
- 10 minutes for discussion on possible uses for the structure they are assigned
- 10 minutes for creating a poster to share with the rest of the class
- 10 minutes for sharing posters
- 10 minutes for discussing how each person played a role in helping their friends with this project

Why guided play? This lesson shows an example of guided play as the teacher plays the role of a guide throughout the lesson. He/she supports students' conversations as they discuss with one another the purpose behind the creation. However, the teacher does not tell the students exactly what to be building or what its purpose should be.

APPENDIX C

Teacher-Directed Play Lesson

Unit/Topic: Unit 1 Week 3 Why Pets are Important

Lesson Day: To be played on digital day 4

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will create a model of a pet based on information given to them and information they gained over the week
- Students will use words to communicate why their modeled animal would make a good pet
- Students will create and describe something for their peers to learn about

Lesson Structure:

- Lesson will begin with teacher showing the class a playdough model of a dog (or other animal of their choosing)
- Tell the class that this is their pet dog named _____.
- Ask the class to come up with reasons why this dog might make a good pet
- As the students respond, write their answers on a poster board labeled “A Dog is a Good Pet”
- The students will now have a chance to create their own playdough pet. Have them think of an animal they would like to have as a pet and draw a sketch of that animal on their whiteboards

- When students are done sketching their animals, they can show the teacher and begin modeling their animal out of playdough
- When playdough creation is finished, the student will check in with their teacher and explain what they created while giving a few reasons why it makes a good pet. The teacher can ask probing questions during this stage to promote high-quality responses to use for their poster board.
- Students will then create a poster labeled “A _____ is a Good Pet”
- They will list at least 3 reasons why their animal makes a good pet and add an illustration with any remaining time.
- Students will then share out with their peers both the poster and playdough model of their chosen pet.

Materials Needed:

- Playdough
- Playdough tools
- Whiteboard
- Whiteboard marker and eraser
- Posterboard
- Coloring and writing utensils

Time Allotted: 50 minutes

- 5 minutes to think and plan about what animal they will choose on whiteboards
- 15 minutes to create their animal out of play dough (extend or stop time, based on overall class needs)

- 15 minutes to create poster
- 15 minutes to share out with the class

Why teacher-directed play?

This is a lesson that shows teacher-directed play because the teacher is explicitly giving an example of the work that students must do at the beginning of the lesson. He/she will also be going around to students and checking in with them frequently as they work and prompting them to state why their pet will be great to have. They can ask questions to further guide understanding that students will put on their posters to share out with their peers and therefore create conversations around a very specific idea.