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Play as a Social Justice Issue in Early Childhood Education

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Play as a Social Justice Issue in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Play is a vital part of the early childhood experience to develop in cognitive and social-emotional realms. Schools are taking away an important tool for children to process new information and build skills needed for lifelong problem-solving by allowing less time for play in early childhood classrooms. This research combines data gathered to show the unique benefits of play in both cognitive and social-emotional areas, as well as qualitative data collected in a play-based and a non-play-based classroom.

The research defends the importance of play-based learning in early childhood and equips teachers with rationale to use play as a tool for learning. The research provides information for teachers who must follow early childhood curriculum that does not engage or challenge children as whole people who progress through play and relationships. The larger implications of the findings are to challenge families, administrators, and policy-makers to also value and support the experiences and relationships that teachers can build through playful learning.

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“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” - W.B. Yeats

Introduction

I am interested in play as a social justice issue in early childhood education because of my teaching experiences. I have taught in three settings as a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teacher. The classrooms were all in public charter elementary schools in urban neighborhoods with 80-97% of the student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The three schools varied in prioritization of developmentally appropriate practice and approaches to academic growth, particularly in curriculum and daily schedules.

I grew up in a rural setting of the United States in a family of academics and enjoyed a relatively experiential public school education. As an adult I moved to more urban settings where I began teaching pre-kindergarten. As I developed relationships with the children who were from a very different place, I recognized pieces of my own childhood in theirs. They delighted in our occasional free afternoon on a large open field - discovering twigs and insects, rolling down a grassy hill, or bringing plucked flowers to their teachers. They were lost in a well-told story, produced an elaborate meal in a mini-kitchen, could describe each feature of their block towers, and were constantly seeking out a good listener. In each of my students I met the performer, the director, the painter, the architect, the chef and the author that I was as a child.

But there was a foreign piece of their early childhood that I did not recognize - it was hard work. The educators around me frequently spoke the language of Common Core Standards, test prep, and a school’s “core values” to make each child fit a favored

set of social skills. This language communicated these educators' focus on hard work from an adult perspective. This contradicted my recollection of early childhood growth, which was acquired through my chosen concentration on an imaginary story I crafted with playmates, or a project with friends. I was told that this focus on work was to give these children justice - to give an equal playing field by "closing the achievement gap." However, I knew there was another way to help children develop while giving them space to be whole, expressive people.

When I discovered Bank Street, I was searching for fellow educators who were passionate about teaching children by interacting with them as people with preferences, original ideas, and unique skills. It was affirming to be surrounded by people who used play to build community and an understanding of the world. I was grateful that my classmates and co-workers were primarily talking about developmentally appropriate practice instead of formal assessment data.

Additionally, in the following years of teaching I continued to observe the ways these children were just like my past self or any other young child, craving more creativity and social interaction in their days. As I continued my teaching career I learned the language of schools who used direct teacher-led instruction, pushing time for play out of school schedules, and I avoided them. In 2015, I chose to teach in a public pre-kindergarten that allowed children to learn in a play-based setting with short community-centered meetings that did include developmentally appropriate levels of academic instruction. I knew that I did not want to teach in a setting where I had to explain to educators that children learn best through play-based learning that gave them freedom to explore.

This conviction was confirmed when I decided to teach in another public school as a kindergarten teacher in 2016. I believed inaccurately that the school supported a more experiential curriculum for its students when I accepted the job. As the year progressed I noticed that my five- and six-year-old students were to spend eight-hour school days at desks studying a very precise curriculum, with transitions to a very short and structured recess, lunch, or specials class to break up the day. They had their share of worksheets or homework, with no free play or no choice time at school. While I tried to help my students grow in that setting, I knew my best teaching happened when I did not closely follow school routines or curriculum. I did decide to stay for the entire school year, but learned about more teacher-led traditional education and how unnatural it is for young children as they grow.

The following year I returned to teach in a pre-kindergarten classroom, and the contrast of students' growth was evident. Children experienced play-based learning throughout the day - developing language, storytelling skills, fine- and gross-motor movement, social-emotional awareness, and many other skills. This was based on a developmentally appropriate schedule and flexible curriculum. I was able to compare the benefits of the play-based program to the very structured and teacher-led learning environment.

Reflecting on my experience, I wondered why many early childhood classrooms are using similar curriculum that is not play-based. Schools who want to help students from lower income communities often translate overall cognitive growth to eliminating play. This ignores the facts that children are fully engaged when playing, developing self-regulation through movement and choice, social-emotional skills by negotiating and

building ideas together, and practicing what works in language. Free play should not be seen as a “reward” for young children’s hard work - play *is* the work of a young child. Early childhood educators must use play as a tool for cognitive and social-emotional growth.

As a Bank Street graduate student, I’ve learned from many progressive classrooms and fellow educators, extending what I know and would like to practice in my classroom. I noticed schools that model these ideas and support play and child-centered practices in the classroom are often different from the schools where I want to work. They are mostly private schools or public schools in affluent neighborhoods.

The children from poor or middle class families who I wanted to teach were stuck behind desks when their feet didn’t even touch the floor. They were focusing on discussions or worksheets, and anxious about state exams from an early age. Their peers from more affluent families were moving around their classrooms with the knowledge that their ideas were valuable, sharing in the democratic experiential learning of John Dewey discussions in my classroom. At some point a line was drawn - between an elite form education and a lower class form of education.

I plan to support the idea that the absence of play is a social justice issue in today’s early childhood classrooms through research. I will cite research that shows how valuable play is to the cognitive and social-emotional development of young children. I will research where play is used creatively in classrooms and where play is minimal or absent in a school setting. I will then name the benefits of play from observations in my own teaching experience, comparing student growth from the traditional year of teaching versus the more progressive year of teaching.

Biases I bring to the study include my own lens of positive or negative perceptions from each work environment, reflecting personal preferences of teaching or administrative support. I also bring the bias of growing up in a different setting and time, with needs that differ from my students' needs. Additionally, I am focused on public school children receiving high-quality play-based education, but acknowledge that children who can attend private schools deserve an excellent school experience as well. I will do my best to reflect research that supports the necessity of play in early childhood education, cite where all young children do not have equal access to play-based learning, and note data that compares growth from my two teaching experiences.

There are a few terms specific to my research that require definition. "Early Childhood Education" includes children in school from birth through second grade. For the purpose of play-based learning in this research, "play" can be defined as, "unstructured, self-chosen, and self-directed" (Rhea, 2016). "Developmentally appropriate practice" or DAP will be defined as, "an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education" (NAEYC). Because I am comparing two years of my teaching experience, that portion of research will reflect data from urban public schools in the United States. These classrooms were Pre-K, with four- and five-year-olds, and kindergarten, with five- and six-year-olds.

Research Methodology

For my research, I will review a variety of research that reveals the cognitive and social-emotional benefits of play for young children. My research will also show that these benefits are absent in many children's lives because play is no longer a central part

of many early childhood programs, or is altogether missing from their school days. In the final part of my research I will compare how my own students were able to grow through the play-based program where I currently teach versus the program that was focused on academics alone.

In the first part of my research, I will discuss research that shows why children need play to grow in the cognitive and social-emotional realms. The research for this section was found in scholarly articles by education professors, educational psychologists, and researchers of early development. Each piece of literature highlights specific instances of children's cognitive or social-emotional development through play.

Rhea (2016) examines children's whole-person growth through free play, especially in outdoor settings. Berk, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer (2009) present research that shows the integrated development of cognition and social-emotional skills because of the meaningful experiences that children internalize as they play. Frost and Steele (2004) show data that illustrates how play can build social-emotional resilience required in response to trauma or challenging situations.

Dennis (2015) collect qualitative research on teachers who use play to effectively support children with language delays. Bergen and Mauer (2000) report the ways that children use symbolic play to understand the symbolism required to develop early reading skills. Hall (2000) researches direct links to literacy through play and authentic experiences. The research of Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, Weisburg, and Zosh (2013) points to early language development that occurs through play.

Next in my research, I will cite evidence that shows that play is not accessible in many public school classrooms, and this is a problem that is increasing. Children in early

childhood classrooms who need free play, outdoor experiences, and gross motor exercise have recess or other play times cut short in order to add “academic” time to their school schedule. The reasoning behind this usually comes from demands for high scores on standardized state tests.

Kamenetz and Nadworny (2016) report research of educators who have increased time in the classroom because of the complexity of academic skills expected at grade levels as low as kindergarten. Rhea and Strauss (2015) cite research that shows the benefits of regular play in places such as Finland, and the necessity of free play for young children who are processing new information. Rhea and Strauss (2015) defend play the idea that “kids are built to move, and having more time for unstructured, outdoor play is essentially like a reset button. It not only helps to break up the day, but it allows kids to blow off steam and apply what is taught in the classroom to a play environment where the mind-body connection can flourish.” Kohn (2015) uses research from psychologists and educators to argue that children are missing valuable learning opportunities by taking away play.

In the final part of my research, I will show from my own experience how children benefitted in the cognitive and social-emotional realms from a public play-based program. I will use Common Core Standards to discuss early learning standards and what they look like in prekindergarten and kindergarten. I will then examine the levels of growth that my prekindergarten students experienced through play versus my kindergarten students who were in a more traditional learning program. The prekindergarten children were formally and informally assessed in the school year 2016-

2017 and the kindergarten children and formally and informally assessed in the school year 2015-2016.

Research Findings

Children develop necessary social-emotional skills through play. These skills support growth in every area of their development. As Cambridge psychologist David Whitebread reports, children must have play to “learn to persevere, control attention, and control emotions. Kids learn these things through playing. It’s essential to their development” (Kohn, 2015). Play is the natural way that children are invested in their own learning as a whole person. Through play children develop a sense of focus and meaning in their learning, practice choice that empowers them as individuals and self-regulators, understand the importance of social relationships, and increases flexible or symbolic thinking.

Children realize a broad range of social-emotional concepts as they engage naturally with peers and teachers through play. “Research has found that developmentally appropriate play and guided play offer rich contexts for children’s learning, possibly because they engage children. Playing children are motivated children” (Berk, et. al, 2009, p. 35). When children are engaged in their environment through play, they are able to naturally invest in a daily routine of learning connections and socializing at their own pace.

As children move from one play activity to the next, they naturally make dozens of choices. “Where should I play? How can I get there? What can I say to this person in the way? What color should I choose? I want that toy. How can I get it?” Each movement and sensory experience involves decision-making that is important to the child, and often

includes interaction with others to reach a goal. Play allows children to “regroup and refocus their energies. It is when children learn to make choices, organize their own activities, negotiate with peers, solve their own problems, and take charge of their lives” (Rhea, 2016, p. 1). Children who are intrinsically motivated to play identify preferences, take steps to pursue goals, and express their choices independently. This build executive functioning, self-regulation, and self-confidence.

As research by Dennis and Stockall (2015) show, “Play is the primary context in which children build their emergent social communicative skills and social competence ... Children need opportunities to engage in social interactions as a means to practice and perfect their social strategies. Preschool years are a critical time for the development of many skills that are essential for long-term school success” (p. 2). Children must have an opportunity for play in early years of school because play authentically builds social skills that positively contribute to every area of development.

Rhea (2016) discusses over three years of research in public and private schools that reveals how 15 more minutes of free play and character development, “shows social development (empathy, communication, resiliency), cognitive development (attentional focus, retention, critical thinking, problem solving), physical development (agility, endurance, healthy body fat percentage), and emotional development (learn the value of risk, less anxious/distressed)” (p. 2). Young children apply the lessons of free play to every domain of development as integrated people who cultivate empathy, critical thinking, and risk-taking all in the same engaging activity.

Children also develop conversational and relationship building skills as they play. Children use play to engage their social communication skills to “satisfy their needs and

desires, control the behavior of others, participate in a social exchange, express opinions or feelings, engage in fantasy, obtain information, and provide information to others” (Dennis, 2015, p. 2). As Golinkoff, et al. (2013) found, “language thrives” within playful interactions because it involves the motivation and modeling of peer and adult conversation (p. 39).

Dennis (2015) also notes the ways that play builds social language skills useful for growth in other areas of life, “Play helps young children learn about their intellectual, social, symbol, and language world. When children participate in play, they enrich their social communication as they use different conversation patterns, flexible and expressive tones, and apply the language rules. Social communication nurtures social and symbolic play. Symbolic play promotes social communication, allowing children to make predictions and test out solutions to problems” (p. 2).

Children experience unique cognitive growth through play. Cognitive growth is inseparable from the social and emotional development of play. The Whole Active child Learning Theory suggests that, “The brain is an integrated instrument. To most people the brain means intelligence. But the brain mediates social and emotional development. Emotion and cognition are constantly interwoven in the lives of children” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 19). Playing children are not only motivated, they are challenged to engage in an array of learning opportunities.

The cognitive benefits of play increase as researchers get to know its overall effect the functions of the brain. “Play can advance a child’s ability to develop purposeful, goal-directed behavior or executive functioning. Play can foster growth in such skills as attention, memory, and cognitive flexibility ... Play can nurture particular

processes such as awareness, exploration, and problem solving ... Levels of play move from simple to more complex processes and serve to organize executive functioning.” (Dennis & Stockall, 2015, p. 2)

Children instinctively come to understand concepts of science and mathematics through free play and teacher-scaffolded exploration. Rhea’s (2016) research shows that, “through unstructured, outdoor play, STEM activities are promoted naturally. In a 15-minute unstructured play environment, research has shown children will spend a third of this time engaged in spatial, mathematical, and architectural activities. Focusing on the natural environment with a more unstructured approach allows children to develop key principles in math and geometry without adult input and through the interests of children” (p. 4).

The research of Berk et al. (2009) offer several examples of science and math concept development through play: “Children learn about space, geometry, and even architecture as they play with simple logs, tracks, blocks, and Legos ... Children experiment with shape, space, measurement, and magnitude” (p. 33). Seo and Ginsburg observe in their research that “46% of children’s natural play [includes] roots of mathematical learning [such as] shape play ... magnitude ... and enumeration (Berk et al., 2009, p. 33-34).

Berk et al. (2009) continue, pointing out that free play and learning through guided play are important for math concept development. “Play builds cognitive knowledge by offering countless opportunities for sustained attention, problem solving, symbolic representation, memory development, and hypothesis testing. Children use play to disentangle ambiguities they find in the world and to test their incipient hypotheses

about how things work” (p. 36-37). For example, a control group of “children who played a linear board game such as chutes and ladders outperformed their peers on four diverse mathematical tasks: numerical magnitude, number line estimation, counting, and numerical identification” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 35-36).

There is also a strong correlation between frequency of play and cognitive development in language and literature. Again, “Researchers found clear and consistent relationships between child’s talk during play and their later literacy outcomes. The conversations children had during the course of the preschool day during free play were related to a broad range of skills in oral language and print at the end of kindergarten” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 30). Bergen and Mauer (2000) explain a Piagetan-based theory of the strong connection between pre-reading skills and play: “As children play with toys in pretend ways they symbolize their ideas and convey signified meaning to others. Why children are learning to read they begin to replace the toy symbols with social designated signs (such as letters and numbers) that then represent internal ideas” (p. 47).

Bergen and Mauer (2000) present further research supporting literacy development through play such as, “Relationships between literacy measures and play were found: positive relationship between percent of pretend play and TALS [language segmenting] ... positive relationship for total symbolic play percentage and score on rhyming task” (p. 52). Along with phonological awareness such as word segmentation and rhyming, play also helps to develop early reading and writing skills. In a first grade classroom, “Literacy related play showed a positive relationship to the early test of reading ability (TERA-2). There was a positive difference noted on the test of early

written language (TEWL) for the group who had the higher initial percent of symbolic play” (Bergen & Mauer, 2000, p. 54-55).

Playing children also build language skills through storytelling, character development, and creative expression. Children can “build upon early play routines, expanding and adapting the play by adjusting to different rules systems, and relating new information to prior knowledge” (Dennis & Stockall, 2015, p. 4). As they play, children organically learn new vocabulary through peer or teacher modeling that applies to the materials or scenario. “Words embedded in in playful contexts are learned better and faster. Young children eagerly incorporate literacy props into their dramatic play and engage in increased amounts of narrative, emergent reading and writing” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 31).

Without regular free play, a child’s progress is neglected, negatively affecting opportunities for social-emotional and cognitive growth. As Frost (2004) observed in his own research, “Creative free play has therapeutic powers. The child’s make-believe play gives children a sense of control over traumatic life experiences” (p.343). Berk et al. (2009) also point out how important play is for all children in every life circumstance when they observe that, “The centrality of play can be seen in its universality. Children play even in the most onerous situations, such as in hospitals or war zones” (p. xi).

Frost (2004) studied children who were deprived of play and were given a wide range of play opportunities in early childhood. Through this research, he discovered the important growth that occurs within play, especially considering brain development. “The range and complexity of play quickly increase as neurons start hard-wiring connections at

a remarkable rate. Play programs neural structure and resulting, increasingly complex neural structures influences ever more complex play (Frost, 2004, p. 395).

Frost (2004) also identified executive functioning and physical development that occurs within play, “The early games of humans equip them for the skills they will need in later life. They learn flexibility, inventiveness, and versatility. They practice motor, language, and negotiation skills. They engage in social and culturally mediated task analysis and problem solving during their play ... Children who don’t play much or are rarely touched develop brains 20 to 30 percent smaller than normal for their age” (p. 345). Without frequent play times in their early years, children miss opportunities to build skills that equip them for life.

Rhea’s (2016) research shows the negative impact a lack of play can have on children. Children do not develop problem-solving skills applicable to future needs if they do not engage in child-led free play, which presents conflict in a safe place. When “the adult steps in to make things better for the child children don’t know how to react or interact in schools or in jobs” (Rhea, 2016, p. 1). Rhea’s research also reveals that play allows children to grow in the area of mental health. “When play is missing, the maladaptive issues present are ... a rise in narcissism, extrinsic control, lack of direction, anxiety, stress, void of self. When play is available, the positive aspects are self-control, self-direction, intrinsic control, rise in empathy, calm, relaxation, failure is seen as part of growth, a peace with self and identity” (Rhea, 2016, p. 2).

Beginning to improve these skills through play supports children’s school success. Berk et al. (2009) show evidence that educators believe children are most ready for school when they “can self-regulate and communicate” (p. 21). Kindergarteners

predicted high levels of achievement when they showed “prosocial styles, made new friends, gained peer acceptance, formed warm bond with teachers” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 21). These skills of self-regulation, social communication, and forming relationships are developed through play. “Positive relationships with others are built upon solid language skill development that fosters children’s abilities to understand and comply with the behavioral expectations of the school environment.” (Dennis & Stockall, 2015, p. 2).

Young children are increasingly receiving a public school education with little to no play in their day. This is a social justice issue because it is not providing children with the support needed to process opportunities for growth in social-emotional and cognitive realms. “Programs like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have contributed to more testing and more teacher-directed instruction” (Kohn, 2015). However, other countries such as Finland outperform our students (DeSilver, 2017) and have ample amounts of play. “In Finland, students take a 15-minute break for outdoor play after every 45 minutes of classroom time ... Here in the United States, however, the average first grader spends seven hours a day at school, sometimes without any recess, much less one outdoors and unstructured” (Rhea & Strauss, 2015).

As Berk et al. (2009) found, “Play has been dramatically reduced, [according to] three studies that examine the prevalence of social pretend play in low-income, community based child-care centers from 1982-2002. Social pretend play for 4.5 year-olds dropped from 41% to only 9% of the observed time” (p. 20). Additionally, early childhood researchers Bedrova and Leong, found they were “witnessing the disappearance of play from early childhood classrooms” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 20). Early

Childhood researcher Edward Zigler also discovered in Head Starts that “play is under siege” (Berk et al., 2009, p. 20).

Kamenetz (2016) reports educators’ observations of less play and more work in early childhood classrooms, feeling the stress of testing affect each grade level.

Researchers at UVA surveyed public kindergarten teachers from 1998 & 2010 finding a concentration on more advanced skills in 2010. “With focus on reading and math ... ‘we saw drops in time they were spending on art activities, music activities, applied experiences, and also science activities like dinosaurs or outer-space [themes]” (Kamenetz, 2016).

In comparison, the 2010 kindergarten teachers from the Kamenetz (2016) study also increased expectations regarding letter identification and counting before the school year, and being able to read by the end of the year. However, “Twenty years ago, only 30% of kindergarten teachers said reading was important in their classroom” (Kamenetz, 2016). While counting and knowing the alphabet are not negative expectations, an academic focus does appear to devalue play because teachers have little time to include it. Early childhood educators told Kamenetz (2016) about guided reading groups that required textual evidence and complete sentences, in classrooms that do not include dramatic play.

As Jay Giedd, a neuroscientist at the University of California, San Diego who has researched brain development in every stage of life through adolescence declares, “Kids younger than seven or eight are better suited for active exploration than didactic explanation. ‘The trouble with over-structuring is that it discourages exploration” (Kohn, 2015). Children develop necessary skills in cognitive and social-emotional realms

Children experience growth through developmentally appropriate school experiences involving play, as I observed in my own teaching career. I will compare the development of the two student groups in the play-based Pre-K program and the teacher-led, highly structured Kindergarten program. I will compare specific areas of cognitive and social-emotional development within each classroom. I will use Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011) objectives for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten to examine individual social-emotional, mathematics, and literacy skills from each classroom.

Prekindergarten and kindergarten children must develop skills of counting and cardinality, which requires counting each object one at a time in the correct number sequence and knowing that the total is the last number counted. This is a building block to problem solving with addition and subtraction, which children will be expected to conceptualize in prekindergarten and practice in kindergarten. Children begin counting objects in a line, develop strategies to organize previously counted objects, and then learn to transfer similar strategies to counting non-linear or scattered objects.

The prekindergarten Common Core objective relating to counting and cardinality is, “CCSS Math PK.CC.4: Count to answer ‘how many?’ questions about as many as 10 things arranged in a line, a rectangular array, or a circle, or as any as 5 things in a scattered configuration; given a number from 1 – 10, count out that many objects” (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Mathematics*, 2011, p. 9) The kindergarten Common Core objective relating to counting and cardinality is, “CCSS Math K.CC.5: Count to answer "how many?" questions about as many as 20 things arranged in a line, a rectangular array, or a circle, or

as many as 10 things in a scattered configuration; given a number from 1-20, count out that many objects” (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Mathematics*, 2011, p. 11).

In my prekindergarten class I am able to track students’ progress on this through one-on-one games or activities during centers with child-selected materials; small groups with games, a “counting jar,” or story problems; and informally with whole group routines throughout the day such as calendar. The mid-year assessment is a standardized test created by the school’s curriculum team and administered individually by teachers three times a year. According to our mid-year assessment, 100% of our students are meeting the end-of-year counting and cardinality standard.

In my kindergarten class we tracked students’ math progress through a formal assessment at the end of each unit and performance during a story problem each day. Students did not have math small groups scheduled into their day. The unit assessments were a paper-and-pencil format while the story problem involved strategies such as drawing, finger-counting, or unifix cubes. According to our final assessments 60% of our students were meeting the end-of-year counting and cardinality standard.

Examining cognitive growth in areas of language and literacy, the two classes have differed in the development of writing skills as well. One important prekindergarten Common Core State Standards objective addressing writing is, “CCSS ELA Literacy PK.W.6: Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened” (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *English Language Arts*, 2011, p. 12).

The correlating kindergarten Common Core State Standards objective is, “CCSS ELA Literacy K.W.3: With prompting and support, use a combination of drawing, dictating, or writing to narrate a single event and provide a reaction to what happened” (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *English Language Arts*, 2011, p. 26).

While letter formation and connection to sound varies from prekindergarten to kindergarten, I was able to assess these skills at both grade levels. In my prekindergarten classroom I assess this objective in a weekly journal writing during small group instruction and during centers with writing materials in a dramatic play or art setting. 100% of children in the prekindergarten classroom can draw and dictate a single event or loosely linked events, while 68.75% can write letter sounds or sight words relating to words in the story.

In the kindergarten classroom, writing was assessed formally through projects produced at the end of each unit. Writing was assessed informally through whole group routines like the morning message or in guided reading groups with quick sight word formation. Children in the kindergarten classroom met this objective mainly through the unit writing projects. These had a structured format within the curriculum, were often written independently at a table, and had specific guidelines for what to produce. In the kindergarten classroom, 60% of the children could draw, dictate, or write events of a story by the end of the year.

In relation to social-emotional growth, I will compare the progress of skills like related to listening to one another and respecting classmates’ ideas. Prekindergarten Common Core State Standards use objectives noting motivation to communicate such as,

“CCSS ELA Literacy SL.PK.1: With guidance and support, participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about prekindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and large groups. 1a. Engage in agreed-upon rules for discussions.

(National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *English Language Arts*, 2011, p. 13). Kindergarten Speaking and Listening Common Core State Standards objectives similarly state, “CCSS ELA Literacy SL.K.1: Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups. 1a. Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion)” (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *English Language Arts*, 2011, p. 32).

Opportunities to assess social-emotional growth within these objectives are available in my prekindergarten classroom within morning meeting, mealtimes, free play activities like recess, solving conflicts that naturally arise during free play, sharing ideas within a small or whole group lesson, or planning play in centers like the kitchen or blocks area. It is developmentally appropriate to expect children at this age to learn to wait their turn to talk. With this consideration, students are given support, routines, and reminders to take turns sharing ideas. In our Morning Meeting share circle, 75% of students wait their turn to participate and attend to the speaker in 80% of share circles.

In my kindergarten class I was able to assess students’ growth in the Speaking and Listening objectives during morning meeting, group projects, sharing findings from independent work time. From similar observations during morning meeting, I was able to note how students listened to one another share and waited to respond appropriately. 40%

of students were able to listen and respond with classroom protocol 80% of the time. Another 25% of students were able to listen and respond with classroom protocol 50% of the time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the research shows, young children need play in order to develop full, healthy cognitive and social-emotional lives. Play helps young children develop literacy skills in a unique way by engaging with language, creating stories, and building an understanding of symbolism. Play also helps children expand STEM-related knowledge as they problem solve, interact with spatial and numeric concepts, and test new hypotheses. Children build resilience, confidence, physical abilities, and relational skills as they engage in play with meaning.

Play is defended as a necessity in school by researchers, psychologists, and educators who work with young children. Play is increasingly pushed out of children's daily lives in school due to pressure on teachers to perform and prepare for tests at earlier ages. As scientists and educators grow in their understanding of play's importance in early childhood education, they must continue to inform teachers who can prioritize play in school. Teachers must communicate to governments that regulate testing, to school administration, and to families how important play is and the ways they will use it in their classroom to help children develop important skills.

The issue of missing play in schools is essential for educators to address as children continue to grow in stressful situations, requiring the unique supports that development through play offers. Children who experience a play-based early education

are empowered as confident people with tools for healthy development in every area of their lives. Play is a tool that educators must use to honor children's needs as they learn and grow.

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