Incorporating play-based learning into early childhood education

by

Kimberly Sue Boxberger

B.S., Fort Hays State University, 2008
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Abstract

Children are naturally wired to do the very thing that will help them learn and grow. Play is a vehicle children use to explore surroundings, form critical thinking skills, and nurture emotions. The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how implementing play-based learning strategies would help social emotional behavior development and if there would be an improvement in literacy skills. The study examined connections between play, behaviors, and literacy by observing kindergarten students in a regular classroom setting. A variety of play-based learning stations were planned and utilized along with the incorporation of the mandatory curriculum to look for relationships in play, behavior, and literacy. Purposefully planned thematic units that included play-based learning were used during the study to investigate social-emotional learning and literacy skills.

The methodology used in the study was action research which allowed me as the researcher to participate as needed to rotate actively as a participant, modeler, or facilitator. Using action research allowed for qualitative descriptions of behaviors to occur and looked for patterns in literacy skill development during play. Relying on literature reviews and educational theorists presented a foundation from which to build on and compare findings. The action research study reviewed the impact of implementing play-based strategies in a kindergarten classroom and in what ways it influenced social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills. Social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills are components of productive learning. Findings established that those observed in the study were affected in some fashion regarding both behaviors and literacy with the implementation of play-based learning strategies.

Field notes, reflective journaling, and video recordings brought forth themes of engagement and creativity in the literacy skill portion of the study and themes of sharing,

empathy, self-awareness, and collaboration in the behavior piece. These themes guided the study to determine if there were either positive or negative effects from either of two types of play-based learning, child-led or teacher directed. Child-led play allowed students to make free choices with same aged peers at stations, and teacher-directed play followed an objective with adult guidance at these stations. Both forms of play-based learning suggest changes in behaviors and literacy skills occurred. The findings indicate the need for an educational shift in the rigor curriculums use to a more developmentally appropriate practice. Educators should consider using play-based learning to make classroom practices exciting and shift to connecting real world problems to hands on learning.

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Approved by:
Major Professor
Dr. Lotta Larson

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family, Justin, Zachary, Seth, and Isabella. Your words of encouragement and belief helped me finish strong. A feeling of gratitude goes to my parents, Janet, Dale, Diana, and Ronnie for being positive role models. This study is also dedicated to the young at heart and any teacher who inspires to be the best for their students.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Hands-on experiences are a child's best learning strategy because it is interactive, motivating age-appropriate skills to develop and stimulating parts of the brain differently than rote memorization of foundational skills. Play-based learning can include both child-initiated and teacher-supported learning methods; combined with social-emotional and academic learning, this type of learning builds and reinforces concepts. "It gives children the opportunities to explore the world; because in dramatic play, children bring the world into their play and explore it safely" (Dinnerstein, 2016, p. 4). Providing inquiry through playful experiences expands critical thinking skills through cooperative problem solving.

Social-emotional behaviors appear to be escalating possibly from the push of the rigorous curriculum in preschool and kindergarten, obstructing the necessary foundational skills to form needed for future educational settings. Literacy skills appear to be declining possibly from the restrictions the COVID-19 pandemic forced or the lack of experiences with books which may be due to technological obsessions. Educators must build on the content students know by applying prior experiences with the curricula and then building new ones. Play-based learning provides three main benefits: building confidence, allowing for safe investigations, and bringing the enjoyment of learning back to the classroom.

This study is different from previous ones as it focused on techniques that can be used by teachers to incorporate play to help transform inappropriate social-emotional behaviors and improve literacy skills. By observing students during play, I looked for patterns in behaviors and examined needs in social-emotional competency areas. I also noted if any conventional reading skills, such as print concepts, were absent. Past studies reviewed up to this point have been mostly focused on student populations outside of the United States with little to no mention of

the impact of social-emotional behavior programs or literacy gaps. This study could extend studies that have used literacy learning blended with play strategies. Contents of this chapter will lay out the background of kindergarten's progression, context of the study including a few theories, state the problem and purpose, lay out the research questions, and offer a definition of terms for clarity.

Background

Over the years, preschool and kindergarten standards have become more rigorous and higher expectations of development status are being written into curricular ideas. In the 1830s, Friedrich Froebel (1836) developed a kindergarten "focused on spiritual and character development, believing this age to be a malleable period of life" (Dombkowski, 2001, p. 528). Primary school teachers were specifically trained yet they did not teach the three R's, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Teacher-student relationships that focused on the child as the center of education rather than the teacher determined kindergarten programs. There was not an exclusive framework to begin with, so kindergarten has mutated over the past century into a purposeful practice of academic preparation.

In the 1920s, kindergarten took a turn due to taxpayers' views leading to the widespread misunderstanding of the work encompassed in developmentally appropriate systems bringing the creation of nursery schools. The formation of nursery schools led to the social problem of money because low-income families were starting to struggle, and those children were not privy to similar preschool experiences that others were. Kantor (1991) discussed the idea that education was one of the most efficacious ways to eliminate poverty and equalize education; newly shaped schools were to help eliminate poverty through education equality. The era of President Johnson

(1960) then developed the Head Start program for four- and five-year-olds of low-income families to ensure quality education was offered to those at the poverty level.

Transitions of half-day to full-day kindergarten happened in the 1980s and 1990s with parental involvement in children's progress as the new focal point. Many reforms have led to "academic frustration in kindergarten leading to academic failure throughout schooling, and children are losing their childhoods to academic pressures" (Dombkowski, 2001, p. 542). Early childhood teachers speculate why there appears to be such a rigorous push for developmentally inappropriate subject matter rather than allowing the inherent trait of learning to play with others take shape and allow for building personalities within the classroom. "Rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels. Academic rigor also means giving our students the skills necessary to be successful in the twenty-first century workplace" (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 6).

Cuban (1992) affirmed that in the past ten years, preschool has become more relevant and kindergarten curriculum has morphed from an introduction of academic skills to a mastery of the same skills. Letter and number recognition now are an essential part of preschool rather than kindergarten and play methods disappeared. Evidence of detrimental alterations to the standards along with utilizing a demanding curriculum have placed average students in a below average status. Additionally, disadvantaged populations are falling farther behind because "Common Core standards are vertically aligned, which means that if kindergarten teachers fail to bring students to proficiency, each subsequent teacher will have a tougher challenge meeting required benchmarks" (Bowdon, 2015, p. 35). To tie the pieces of rigor and literacy together, play-based learning could be considered a phenomenon that many teachers would be excited about using; a

modern design in curriculum could confirm how a certain phenomenon embedded in practice shows relationships among the variables teachers face.

The past century's countless reforms have transformed education, specifically kindergarten, which is why it continues to be searching for a formal place in the United States education system. Kindergarten began as a romantic image for social interaction and play, however in the 'progressive' oriented focus debate, questions of long-term academic benefits left critics in a tug of war measuring children's performance in adult assigned tasks instead of original work (Dombkowski, 2001, p. 532-533). Previously, kindergarten was centered around social relations, fine motor skill building, singing, learning through play, or interacting with peers. Teamwork and inquiry are highly acclaimed objectives that are listed in the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards (KSDE, n.d.) yet seem to have been eliminated due to high academic expectations and low performance scores.

According to the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE, n.d.), Kansas Math Standards (2018, -a) and Kansas Standards for English Language Arts (2017) state that students today are expected to know how to count to twenty, write their name, and recognize all the letters of the alphabet upon entrance. Those listed standards show very little focus on learning to share or cooperate in small groups to solve problems. Despite the lack of a specific curriculum, play-based learning was utilized in past educational practices before preschool was established and focused on social interaction which built collaborative experiences. And with the loss of recesses and technological advances that are prominent today, playing with peers appears to no longer be a priority so that natural exploration between young children is decreasing.

Trends in social-emotional programs seem to be on the rise especially with the worldwide pandemic that consisted of social distancing rules. Ashdown and Bernard (2011) found that

"overall social-emotional learning (SEL) programs had positive effects on both cognitive and academic outcomes in the short term (preschool), medium term (primary school) and long term (high school)" (p. 398). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, n.d.) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS, 2020) offer globally accepted guidelines involving the subjects of culture, individual growth, and developmentally appropriate practices. Elaboration on the role of kindergarten change needs to be reexamined because of social problems, rising numbers of at-risk children, links between childcare and school, and family involvement.

Context

Children are naturally wired to do the very thing that will help them learn and grow. Play is a vehicle children use to explore surroundings, form critical thinking skills, and nurture emotions. According to NAEYC (n.d.), "The impulse to play comes from a natural desire to understand the world." Play-based learning is a type of early childhood education based on child-led and open-ended play which includes teacher supported learning. It assists students with cooperative learning and builds communication skills necessary for social-emotional development of primary school students.

Voluntary, enjoyable activities that involve play lay the foundation for a child to develop social skills, encourage motivation to learn and engage in building language and numeracy skills. "Music, art, and nature study were legitimate kindergarten subjects of study for young children" (Spodek, 1988, p. 204). Taking initiative, focused attention, and curiosity about the world are a part of play and this requires careful planning. Play-based learning can be outlined as education supported by teachers and led by children who are "following their own ideas, in their own way and time, for their own reasons" (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 12).

Unlike core subjects such as literacy or mathematics, play-based learning does not have learning standards connected directly to it and requires work to implement. DeLuca et al. (2020) discussed how play-based learning is not structured around specific outcomes, nor does it fit neatly into a box that can be easily assessed. Play-based learning is uneasy to implement due to restrictions of the accountability that comes from standardized testing and parental beliefs of school experiences. Play-based learning terminology may be confused by those who think the basis of it includes games and free-time (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Play can be considered to be either child-led or teacher-directed, depending on what teachers expect to happen. In allowing playful experiences to present themselves, inquiry through cooperation with peers introduces new ways of thinking. Prior experiences of the students release critical thinking and problem-solving skills; therefore, by building on what students know, teachers can plan differently. Natural needs of children lead to curiosity and constructing communication skills while peer interaction assists with development.

Negotiation is a primary goal of play-based learning and often leads to collaboration amongst students. Communication skills can be built from play-based learning and inherently steer emotions. Social-emotional learning is a continuous process that comes with time and maturation. It builds identities for individuals by forming relationships and setting goals. With cooperative group work, children learn self-awareness, empathy, and confidence forming social norms they feel are important for success. Social-emotional learning may need to be modeled by teachers, depending on what each child brings to the situation.

Child-led, or unstructured, play allows students to explore materials on their own with little to no interruption from the teacher and permits socialization within classmates. This type of play is self-chosen and creative ideas differ with each individual child. Unstructured play is a

type of free play that grants autonomy to each child forcing decisions to be made alone or with peer assistance. There is not necessarily an exact direction or measurable outcome with unstructured play, simply having endless possibilities and using imagination are the main ideas. If questions arise in unstructured play, the teacher can document needs accordingly and fill in missing pieces by acting as an inquirer or modeler to support deeper thinking.

Teacher-directed, or structured, play can be modeled with specific requirements to meet objectives which are planned with precise details in mind. Literacy and mathematical skills can be included in teacher-directed play through the introduction of thematic vocabulary and standard-based requirements of curricular programs. Guiding play helps with transitions of materials which may be unfamiliar to students. Planned sections of play have items the teacher believes the students should know about and know how to use. By adding in unfamiliar tools as the lesson progresses with proper introductions and instructions, new connections can be made. With a purposeful plan, teachers should model specific jobs and tools as needed. Then, they discuss rules pertinent to those jobs that are assigned.

Teachers can create purposeful play stations and model manners, or rules, building a stage for play to occur and encouraging social interaction. Guiding play can help with transitional phases of kindergarten rigor; by keeping independence in mind and acknowledging curricular criteria, connections emerge between play and literacy. Teachers understand the foundation of learning is about engagement in various settings with diverse people and enjoying the journey. “Knowledge of child development can help educators understand what young children are capable of knowing, how they come to know at a particular developmental stage, and how children come to know what they know is true, validating their knowledge” (Spodek, 1988, p. 207). Structured play at various ages looks different, is deliberate in nature, pinpointing

certain vocabulary terms and tools, and specific to the task laid out by the teacher. Younger ages may need help learning how to take turns and share, while older students may need challenges set to deepen knowledge. Problems are developed for standards to be met and objectives are then purposefully set incorporating assessments or evaluations. Setting goals with the children, either independently or collaboratively, makes them meaningful and achievable.

School administrators may have anxiety about using play-based learning because the role of the teacher is not specified and there may be a lack of structure in the classroom. Disconnection between play and learning occurs because expectations have changed, pressure from higher administration is being felt, and parents' beliefs limit play opportunities. Opfer et al. (2008) stated, "Districts do not leave teachers to their devices, neither do they make use of systematic tools to persuade teachers to adopt teaching patterns. They tend to make unconnected decisions that do not lead to a pattern of practice" (p. 302). Teachers can bring awareness of subject matter into play-based learning with the incorporation of prior experiences and connect the subjects to children's interests by using scaffolding techniques. Stakeholders may question the difficulty of concepts involved with play-based learning as some may be challenging for this age group, requiring that detailed structure and specific measurable outcomes be given. School brings a feeling of safety and fairness for many students, which play-based learning can interfere with. Confusion, frustration, and failure must be confronted so children discover how to navigate real world situations.

Curwood (2007) mentioned that children learn to socialize and cope when playing and play breeds motivation and reasoning. Children can play a simple game of hide and seek which consists of rules, roles, and communication. Another example is the popular game of tag which brings bruises and drama, suggesting empathy, problem solving, and teamwork. Both intrinsic

and extrinsic learning happen during play; experiencing fulfillment and recognizing passion encourages resilience. In the classroom, handing out stones and blocks may encourage creativity and innovation. Choices, freedom, and lack of restraint lead to deeper thinking, and when given a blank slate to work with, the conflict resolution involved in play-based learning could lead to talking things out. Scaffolding techniques offered by the teacher build the foundation for confidence to experiment. Childhood Education International (CEI, n.d.) believed education should mirror the modern world realities by redesigning schools that incorporate creativity and problem-solving skills.

The reform of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) examined how instruction changed, stressing that teachers need to help close the achievement gap in underserved students and assist with standardized high stakes testing for accountability. Then in 2015, President Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) act mixing in the College and Career Ready Standards (KSDE, n.d.) which required teachers to use evidence-based interventions to improve the quality of education. Instead of buying crafts and costumes, district funds seem to be being used for workbooks and basal readers. The new reforms have designed a course unfamiliar to teachers regarding developmentally appropriate practices; parental pressure to cover basic skills early on attests parents may be unaware of the term of developmentally appropriate and could be ignoring vital play-based learning opportunities. Allowing enjoyable and imaginative processes to take place permits routines that children decide on, leading to improvised freedoms navigating a safe amount of risk. Whether play is fantasy, constructive, game-like, or rough and tumble, the idea is to allow make-believe processes to blend with individual experiences opening interactive doors of autonomy (Mraz et al., 2016).

Theoretical Frameworks

The constructivist theory of Piaget (1964) discussed how people adapt to their environment and Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory discussed how reasoning through social interactions influence development. Mraz's (2016) purposeful play theory promoted enjoyable, meaningful experiences and Dr. Jones's (2020) idea behind a growth mindset foster a creative and active type of learning. In my experience, children construct background knowledge in a variety of ways. By socializing with peers at school or at the park, children begin to form communication skills and perceptions from those who they meet almost immediately. Teamwork and collaborative behaviors can evolve by implementing developmentally appropriate play-based learning methods in a classroom. Purposeful play can encourage proper social skill practice, which is part of successful development for young learners.

Early childhood settings are often the first 'outside' community children are exposed to, and early childhood educators are viewed as nurturing supporters of responsive interactions that nurture their full range of social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and linguistic abilities (Recio, 2019). However, with all the educational reforms and revisions over the past century, the framework surrounding early childhood has taken criticism as to its importance. Piaget (1964) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories have been investigated through numerous empirical studies providing a wide explanation of play-based interventions. By integrating play-based learning through meaningful, child-directed activities positioned with boundaries that incorporate standards, teachers can entice the youngest learners.

Constructivists like Piaget (1964) believe knowledge is acquired through active involvement (play) and socio-cultural theorists like Vygotsky (1978) believe adults and other children add to that mastery of concepts. Social and problem-solving skills are aspects of the real

world that need to be addressed, so by adding play-based methods into the school day, educators can build these abilities. Play-based learning, social-emotional skills and literacy growth are related educational issues that need to be visited in early childhood environments. Spodek (1988) found that kindergarten classrooms in China teach structured lessons through lectures for no more than 30 minutes and illustrate concepts to maintain interests. Then teachers release children to participate as they so choose; completing tasks while providing play opportunities represents a socialization type of experience (Spodek, 1988, pp. 207-208).

Statement of the Problem

Through observing students in the classroom, it is apparent that social-emotional behaviors are required for successful developmental transitioning and literacy learning. One problem appears to be a lack of social-emotional learning programs in schools, which poses the question of how to handle this missing component of education. Teachers find this is not listed as a curricular item but is a requirement for productive establishment of initial proficiencies. It is not known how play-based learning specifically affects children's learning or in what way emotions tie into educational situations. Social-emotional programs are being developed and tested, however many schools are not using these and simply relying on the teachers to adjust. Another problem lies in the literacy deficits students have when coming to kindergarten. Whether it be lack of motivation, no family support, or improperly trained teachers, the difficulties I have experienced with students involving literacy are troublesome. While some of the literature indicated that the addition of play shows positive results in literacy growth, very little research was available from places in the United States.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to develop an understanding of how implementing play-based learning strategies impacted social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills in kindergarten students. Three focus students were selected from the class after the initial observation was completed. These students were chosen based on a variety of factors, moreover I was hoping the implementation of play would benefit them in one or both areas. By reviewing theoretical and empirical literature, associations among play-based learning and social-emotional behaviors were being investigated to look for correlational relationships. Qualitative and quantitative studies along with meta-analyses have also been reviewed looking for affirmations of definitions and connections between play-based learning and social-emotional behaviors. This study looked for relationships between play and behaviors by observing kindergarten students in a regular classroom setting. A variety of play-based learning stations were planned and utilized by incorporating the assigned curriculum allowing my role as the teacher to rotate actively as a participant, modeler, or facilitator (see Appendices A and B).

Purposeful planning in specific stages of this study were used as the observation of knowledge and skill sets students brought in was surveyed, noting prior experiences, or lack of, to determine what modeling needed to follow. Intentional planning was utilized based on meeting curricular areas for successful standard grading to transpire. Skills that were observed to combine the idea of play-based learning with social-emotional learning included taking turns, collaboration, responsible choices, and empathy.

Research Questions

Within the parameters of this study, one goal was to see if kindergarten students' social-emotional behaviors were influenced by incorporating structured and/or unstructured play-based

stations in the classroom. Another goal was to examine how play impacted literacy by integrating educational points within those play stations. The research questions were:

Overarching Question: What happens when play-based learning strategies are implemented in a kindergarten classroom?

RQ1: What ways, if any, will using play-based learning assist with social-emotional behavior development in kindergarten students?

RQ2: How does play-based learning impact literacy skills in kindergarten students?

Significance of the Study

In planning the play-based stations for this study, problematic issues in the classroom regarding behaviors were used to describe experiences and patterns during literacy learning. The research and results related to how play-based learning influenced social-emotional behaviors in kindergarten students and in what ways, if any, did using play-based learning assist with building literacy skills. Collaboration with other teachers and my personal feelings were recorded and documented during the process over an 18-week period to analyze real world scenarios in educational settings that included play-based techniques. With the small amount of research done on play-based learning specific to social-emotional behaviors, this study led me to results specific to social-emotional learning. In using the two different types of play (structured and unstructured), details arose, and adjustments were made in my pedagogical thinking.

Change in kindergarten has become a priority with varying perceptions regarding what is considered appropriate. “Teachers and parents assume that a major outcome of preschool includes increased readiness of children for kindergarten in social/emotional and academic aspects” (Hatcher et al., 2012, p. 2). Presently, kindergarten is resembling first grade classrooms with emphasis on formal reading instruction while ignoring the social-emotional needs that come

with natural curiosity surrounding play (Lee et al., 2006). Hatcher et al. (2012) shared views from people about emerging negativity because the image of kindergarten children spending most of their days engaged in reading and math at the expense of play is disturbing.

Student learning linked to innovative approaches like play-based learning can help build new curriculums and could be key concepts that form dedicated educators and thriving learners. Wang and Lam (2017) stated that teachers should be allowed to use their professional knowledge to link play to learn by considering needs and wants of each child. “The pressures caused by the standards’ emphasis on academic achievement and the demand for accountability can make it difficult to justify the use of open-ended, play-based practices to skeptical stakeholders such as administrators, colleagues or parents” (Goldstein, 2007, p. 179). Teacher responses to standard changes depict mixed emotions, torn between the push for accountability, administrative mandates, and what they know children need. Pedagogically, purposeful play-based learning may support the learning of children both developmentally and academically. Social-emotional skills are proficiencies early childhood educators know are required for the beginning of a solid learning foundation.

“Children considered to be ‘at-risk’ for academic difficulties displayed lower levels of confidence. This indicates that educators who advocate for the use of games and free choice may encourage those skills to flourish” (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011, p. 398). Purposeful play could be that vital bridge between learning and real life by helping set personal goals. Mraz et al. (2016) believed that with the allowance of play in the classroom, inquiry accepting that invitation of real-life situations to occur. Actions of lingering, examining, wondering, noticing, asking, and sharing fuel critical thinking of problem solving and prove to be a natural instructional method.

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Limitations of action research include a cycle of constant planning, observing, and reflecting that could continue for an unspecified time. Occasionally, researchers who use action research are working on improving a program or refining strategies. Results may not be verified due to biases and views of that researcher. Since statistics are not represented in descriptive data, the qualitative components may not be an accurate selling point for validity. In this study, I observed video recordings and field notes to code behaviors which was intensive. Confusion of my role as the teacher during play-based learning could have caused this research to have varied expectations that may be seen as subjective. The small sample size used was not representative of the age group being studied and with large amounts of data that was sorted, interpretation of this study was left to my discretion. Student participants were assumed to accurately represent the population and situations in a small, rural area of Kansas.

I chose a nearby school for the convenience of data collection and familiarity of the district caused little disruption in the daily schedules and culture. The lack of ethnicity in the student population could have caused for doubt once results were compiled and presented. The objective of this study was to see if the incorporation of play formed empathetic behavior patterns in kindergarten students.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, terms used that may require defining are developmentally appropriate practice, early childhood education (learning), play-based learning, social-emotional behaviors, social-emotional learning, and structured or unstructured play types. The following definitions are intended for clarity needed for interpretation of the research and were used to comprehend educational practices.

- Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP): methods that promote individual cognitive development and maturation through joyful and engaging strengths-based play approaches (NAEYC, n.d.).
- Early childhood education (ECE): any state-licensed program that provides early care and education of children from birth to kindergarten entry, including, but not limited to, childcare centers, family child-care homes, preschool programs funded by the state or federal government, with the outlined purpose to foster social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development (USDE, n.d.).
- Play-based learning (PBL): child or teacher-directed methods using categorical tools and critical thinking to solve a problem. Child-led is self-chosen, follows individual ideas and reasons including unstructured time to explore alone or with peers. Teacher-directed is planned play areas or activities leading to an organized academic feel. (Wickstrom et al., 2019)
- Social-emotional behaviors: manners that develop self-awareness, self-control and interpersonal skills needed for school and work. (Committee for Children, 2023)
- Social-emotional learning (SEL): the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life successes. (Committee for Children, 2023)
- Structured play: directed tasks controlled by the teacher to deliberately teach concepts on how to use tools and to introduce related precise vocabulary, supporting children who are at risk. (Wickstrom et al., 2019)

- Unstructured play: open-ended, creative tasks allowing children to take the lead in planning with endless possibilities and no direction, including not having a specific learning objective. (Wickstrom et al., 2019)

Summary

Chapter one defined play-based learning as teachers allowing students voluntary choices enveloped with academic learning that included literacy. This chapter provided a background of the evolution of the kindergarten curriculum and changes standards have encountered over time. Critical thinking skills are the new expectation and from the research, rigor of kindergarten curricula conflicts with the developmentally appropriate practices needed for school success. Regional characteristics define kindergarten readiness to allow for cultural differences around the United States. Play-based learning does not have a set curriculum and some stakeholders criticize teacher pedagogy regarding freedom in educational settings. Social-emotional behaviors were defined as understanding feelings and adjusting to new environments.

Chapter two will discuss the theoretical compositions of play and children's development highlighting Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, Piaget's (1969) cognitive development theory, Mraz's (2016) purposeful play theory, and Jones' (2020) playful mindset theory. These theories were applied to related empirical research, discussing qualitative studies and case studies which examined age-appropriate practices and how behaviors impact success. Standards, curricula, social-emotional, and play-based learning articles were reviewed to develop an understanding of the educational process. Individual circumstances and social-emotional learning studies were used to extend the behavior component.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The literature that has been examined in preparation for this study discussed the aspects of kindergarten, learning standards for academics in relation to kindergarten, and curricular programs for play-based learning and social-emotional learning. In several of the reviews, qualitative and mixed method studies were conducted to explain human experiences. Theoretical frameworks such as constructivism, socio-culturalism, purposeful play, and playful mindsets emerged. The empirical literature reviewed included standards and pedagogy, early childhood education, developmentally appropriate practices, play-based learning ideas consisting of structured and unstructured concepts, environmental connections, and social-emotional behaviors. Associations of both the positive and negative effects of play-based learning on development, planning, and social-emotional studies were aligned in this review.

This study used play-based learning strategies to find relationships in social-emotional behaviors and academics. One problem that was being investigated was how social-emotional behaviors influence successful transitioning in school environments. The conceptual framework, as illustrated in figure 2.1, shows how structured (guided play or teacher-directed) and unstructured (free play, child-led, or open-ended) play-based learning strategies could construct relationships between social-emotional behaviors and academics. Many factors contribute to the diversity of students' needs so the role of the teacher may varied depending on the play situations and background knowledge of the students.

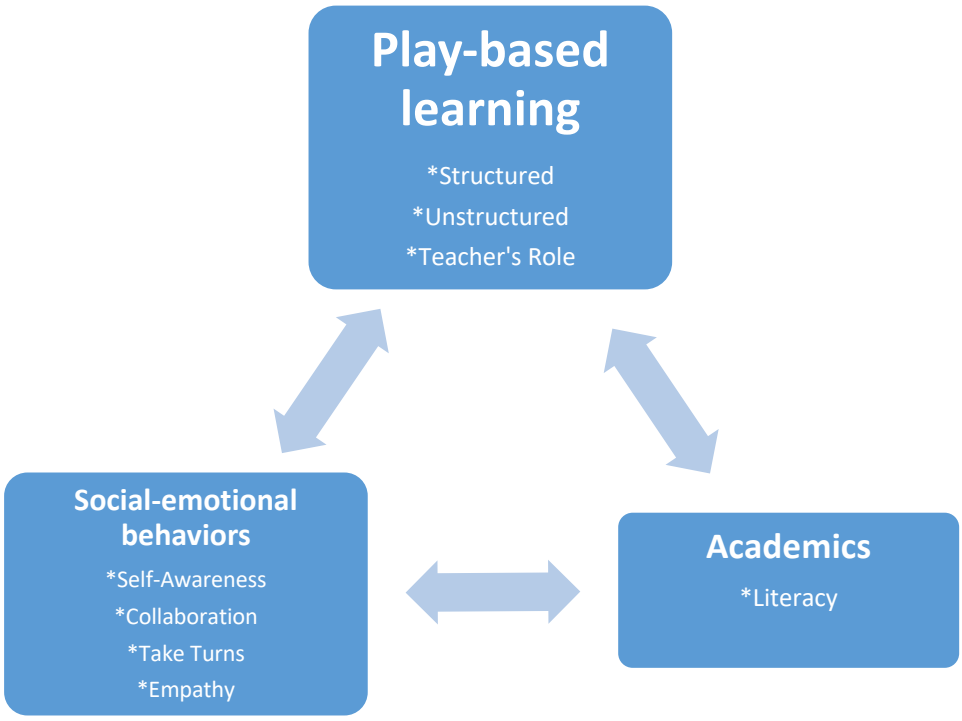

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Frameworks

Both Jean Piaget (1969) and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) works play an integral part of the idea surrounding play-based learning. Using the world to discover and form opinions strengthens development as maturation naturally occurs. Both theorists believed developmental dimensions of children need a strong environment that promotes play to deepen thinking and language. More recently, Kristen Mraz (2016) and Dr. Julie Jones (2020) have been working on purposeful play projects and studying the science behind play. These authors showed that maturation comes in stages and play suggests a natural progression that makes learning relevant and strengthens trust. Communities and relationships were built during play-based stations inspiring compassion and conversation, while creating and negotiating were encouraged in classrooms to make real world connections.

Constructivist Theory

As students play and learn, they create social connections and discover new ideas. Jean Piaget's (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) theory of cognitive development explained how humans acquire and construct knowledge in stages. From birth to age two, children are in the sensorimotor stage. During this stage of cognitive development, children learn dramatic discoveries when they walk and talk. Next, the preoperational stage includes ages 2-7, where children learn symbolism and perspective, proposing a developmental sequence to play. Around age 4-5, children begin entering school environments that establish socialization and collaboration. Bautista et al. (2019) studied preschool guidelines in Singapore under Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) that included preschools to be a high-quality early childhood practice. The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) reported that reading skills must begin early stating, "children who lag behind same age peers in development of literacy skills struggle with comprehension" (Goldstein et.al, 2017, p. 89).

Malone (1999) reviewed early childhood settings and discovered a need to reframe traditional approaches to assessment. Interventions in terms of topics that are developmentally oriented and play-based could be the focus of lessons. Evidence led to contextual factors (child, program, family, and measurement characteristics) acting as influencers on children's behavior and the program being applied. Diamond and Whitington (2015) stated, "Developmental neuroscience, particularly epigenetics, has established that the quality of children's earliest environments is critical to developing the brain's architecture" (p. 11). Vygotsky's (1966) sustainability argument equally revealed that ideas and emotions authenticate knowledge construction and add insight to constructing concepts in a child's environment. Nurturing exploration and inspiring choice focus on more of a 'whole child' development.

Whole child development requires inquiry and choice through imaginative and cultural communities. Piaget (1993) viewed play as an integral piece of a child's development. Speculation surrounding play from other research along with the evolutionary history of kindergarten began a quest for an explanation of the disappearance of play in primary classrooms. History shows that children are social beings who need peers as well as exposure to a variety of settings to develop naturally. While there is no set curriculum for educators to use regarding play-based learning, standards can be easily intertwined with science and social categories to build a foundational beginning in both academics and social-emotional learning.

Socio-Cultural Theory

Social-emotional skills are required for successful learning and transitioning. Culture is another key component of social learning; depending on the beliefs of each culture, education can either play a key role in growth or it may be seen as a hurdle one must jump over to advance in society. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development included effects of a child's surrounding community. He believed by playing and building imagination with others, conceptual abilities increase. Children need growth, language, and interdependence to frame roots of learning to build upon. Piaget's (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) idea of cognitive development contained interactions with the environment and discrete stages of development. As a child matures, the focus shifts and schemas become blocks that help with adaptation to new worlds encountered. Social-emotional skills seem to be lost due to conflicting ideas surrounding some curricular practices and required assessments.

Some other tenets who have contributed to the idea of early development include George Mead (1894) and Abraham Maslow (1943). Early childhood development lies between the ages of zero and eight with a focus on physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and motor development.

Mead (2022), a sociologist, had this idea of the concept of self that included external social interactions (group settings) and internal (primary) feelings, which begin at birth and emerge as children grow and are exposed to varied situations. Maslow (Acevedo, 2018) presented a hierarchy of needs that must be met before learning can even happen. Children have basic, psychological and self-fulfillment needs that must be considered before educational concepts transpire. These needs have been broadened by recent sociologists to include cognitive and aesthetic needs as well as self-actualization (becoming).

Devi et al. (2018) considered a cultural-historical theory posed by Vygotsky (1966) that stated, “Imagination is the core content of children’s play and play has been shown to make an important contribution to children’s learning and development” (p. 296). Roles of the teacher during play were discussed and defined as either being an observer, narrator, inquirer, or resource supplier, all of which recommend separate amounts of interaction. Each role in turn, offered a different pedagogical position of the teacher and deserves more investigation. Principles and guidelines framed support for teachers to make decisions intentionally to practice commonality, context, and culture appropriate lesson implementation. Quality versus quantity was a shared vision that met diverse needs of all students and connected a variety of experiences from the children to enrich core content. Ideologies of development examined were maturation, the cultural passing of knowledge and morals from one generation to the next, and structured, natural interactions with the environment.

Purposeful Play and Playful Mindset

Two emerging theories regarding play-based learning recently originated from teacher Kristine Mraz (2016) and Dr. Julie Jones (2020). Mraz (2016), who is currently an instructional coach, has written several books on practical classroom practices that include child-centered

learning. Purposeful play is a recent concept that suggests skills of collaboration and communication be connected to goals and standards to optimize a deeper level of learning. Mraz et al. (2016) believed that the rigor of learning can be enhanced by bringing play into daily lessons building a growth mindset for students. Mraz et al. (2016) stated that, "Tools for social-emotional skills are linked to play, balancing emotional regulation through uncertainty" (p.13). Engaging students in curriculum building and designing the classroom would offer ownership that implies a certain value in learning. Using routines and implementing rules begins the foundation of a solid structure that can lead to independent work. "Play invites negotiation and exploration at a level suited for each child, leading to a growth mindset encouraging risk taking and curiosity needed for real world situations" (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 89).

Similarly, Jones (2020) posed that teachers who allow fun and playful learning to take place are increasing subject meaning by using hands-on activities relevant to the real world. Jones (2020), who is currently a director of student teaching and early childhood, is active in researching genuine experiences in play-based learning and teaching strategies. In their book, Dearybury and Jones (2020) looked at how play inspires creativity, builds trust, strengthens relationships, cultivates community, and nurtures growth. Discovery through choice can form connections to content and a purposeful plan of play transforms both a student's mindset and a teacher's pedagogy (Dearybury & Jones, 2020, p. 64-65). Interaction from play develops trust and relationships by allowing discussions with a variety of ideas and beliefs being presented. "Nurturing, intentional play environments allow for mistakes to happen, which grows confidence and in providing these experiences for creativity a growth mindset is born" (Dearybury & Jones, 2020, p. 219).

Play-based learning may be used as early as birth but could easily continue into secondary school practice as well. The term ‘play-based’ simply morphs into ‘project-based’ learning, which can be used to assist older learners by exploring real world problems and tools that are meaningful and practical. Engaging higher level thinking can be done through these types of cooperative learning by setting objectives that lead to an outcome or fulfill requirements for an assessment. The big idea of play-based learning involves young students who are discovering ways to communicate and solve problems, but the exact same things happen through project-based learning. Higher level critical thinking skills are formulated in this evolving form of education.

Empirical/Qualitative Research

The empirical research used to help answer or negate the research questions has been conducted on similar-aged students and teachers who were involved in play-based learning methods, developmentally appropriate practices, kindergarten discussions, and social-emotional behavior implementation; however, most of these studies have been in a variety of countries with very few having been conducted in the United States. Investigators observed cognitive phenomena surrounding play-based learning and obtained knowledge on the population by measuring a variety of calculations related to developmentally appropriate practices. Descriptive experiences of those studied were recorded and conclusions of growth or lack thereof were documented from this literature.

Standards and Pedagogy

In 2010, many states including Kansas implemented the Common Core Standards which have grade-specific goals and explanations of subject matter for teachers and parents (KSDE, n.d.). The demand to compete in a world that required real life preparation including critical

thinking and problem-solving skills was introduced and the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards (KSDE, n.d.) began to place more accountability on the student. Hatch (2002) stated, "Imposing common standards on all students ignores individual differences, limiting the development of the most talented and jeopardizing the learning opportunities of those who need the most help and support" (p. 460). Hatch (2002) agreed that there should be high standards for students and teachers but implementing the 'one-size-fits-all' standard will devalue children's uniqueness (p. 460).

As properly trained professionals, teachers should be trusted to contribute to the assembling of these standards. "Teacher participation is a cultural decision dependent on curricular and pedagogical aims. The focus on why contexts are proposed should be driven by teachers' professional background" (Bautista et al., 2019, p. 717). Wang and Lam (2017) expressed how pedagogy should be reflective of what teachers' hopes are, what knowledge and skills they teach, and how supporting development through different materials and activities benefits all children. Educators may need to consider different pedagogical practices dealing with the concept of play-based learning. Explicit and direct types of instruction can help support children who are at risk of developing reading and math complications yet learning through discovery and free play has shown to improve performance too. Wickstrom et al., (2019) showed findings that demonstrated children's acquisition of geometric knowledge was impacted by instruction, as children who were taught through guided play performed significantly better than children in both the free play and direct instruction conditions. One problem lies in the lack of understanding that comes with including play-based learning and how to shift those 'play' principles into current practices.

"Teachers who are skilled at noticing struggling students provide choice, are not overly controlling of what occurs in the classroom and are more focused on learning needs of students" (Curby, LoCasale-Crouch, et al., 2009, p. 348). Teacher perspectives came into play with these ideas. Examples of challenges that seem common include: integrating play with learning, endorsing the concept of play through learning, practical barriers dealing with the relationship of standards, and lack of training in play-based learning. Child-centered thinking that focuses on activities rather than outcomes addressed a whole child learning view. Teacher-directed play enables the curriculum targets to be achieved and in asking open-ended questions, higher level thinking could be obtained. Shared control of play between the child and teacher could lead to the extension of prior knowledge and the introduction of novel information. The strength of free play consisted of allowing children to practice and internalize skills independently leading to self-efficacy. In a study by Pyle and Bigelow (2015), one educator stated, "Play is extremely important but it's also a chance for them to practice skills they have been taught" (p. 391).

While standards are recommendations offered to educators with very few that revolve around play, contradictions lie in the amount of time needed for assessing and the organization of play (Walsh et al., 2010). Play-based learning would require building of subjective assessments, meaning each teachers' views could differ on growth and then the debate of consistency ensues. Accountability reforms that stimulate effective instruction differ depending on the educator's conceptions of these reforms and how programs are practiced ensures meeting goals of them. With declining test scores, policy makers began removing play from curricula and standards adapting to the ever-changing norms of society (Brown, 2011). Harris and Herrington (2006) claimed there was a belief that schools were lowering academic standards by shifting from rigorous content, watering down standards by adding play, rather than raising the bar. Quality

subject matter is required for success, however a disconnect between the purpose and role of assessments drives fragmented bits steering teaching to the test (Brown, 2011). State and federal accountability were being determined annually by overall competency scores received from local assessments throughout the school year (Evans, 2017).

Standards are set by the government in each state and teacher pedagogy may be influenced by social elements. Teaching methods are subject to each educators' values and beliefs, however careful direction of subject content must be considered. Research surrounding standards may not necessarily contain gaps, however the multitude of changes over time may cause confusion and irritation. Pedagogical thinking varies widely dependent on experiences and location of the educator.

Early Childhood Curricula

Play-based learning and social-emotional learning (SEL) are sizable points of interest in early childhood education. Early childhood educators are pressed to promote intentional social behaviors intertwined with academic learning to prepare students for kindergarten by "monitoring instruction so they can provide students with learning experiences that develop individual skills and knowledge in relation to developmental norms" (Brown, 2011, p.153). The 'nature' of childhood is a journey of learning encompassed in innocence that changes with relationships and experiences presented. Wood (2014) stated "Drawing from neuroscience and cognitive, social, and developmental research, a broad awareness of the importance of play and its role in well-being: Play is like fertilizer for brain growth" (p. 52).

Articles by both Breathnach et al. (2016) and Wang and Lam (2017) regarding American-style, play-based curricula in Queensland and China held similar views regarding preschool and kindergarten standards. Advocates for play-based learning look for engaging tasks that motivate

academic and non-academic learning. The potential in allowing children creative freedom to adapt instruction needed for real world professions could prove to be a valuable experience. Breathnach et al. (2016) discussed how the exclusion of students from building the curriculum raises concerns that educational agendas may be sidelined. Including students in offering ideas for what they desire to learn could be the beginning of a new outlook on education. "A play-based curriculum is designed to achieve a balance between child-initiated and teacher-directed activities to optimize the learning experiences of children" (Wang & Lam, 2017, p. 30).

The lack of training encircling play-based strategies and social-emotional learning deters many teachers from incorporating them into their classrooms because their role is undefined. Walsh et al. (2010) completed a play pilot project, looking to remove the experience of failure and promote self-competence shifting from a teacher-led formal approach to an informal practice for four-year-olds. Some teachers lack knowledge of how to support, intervene, and interpret play-based activities even though they are valued. "Concepts and content knowledge associated with sustainability are too complex for young children to grasp and traditional play-based pedagogies make it difficult for teachers to effectively locate knowledge within the early childhood curriculum" (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013, p. 329). Complex thinking enveloped in a rigorous curriculum abandons some of those beliefs.

Skills are difficult to assess, and the contemporary context of creativity adds to the uncertain social interaction piece of collaborative construction. Walsh et al. (2010) discussed how traditional assessments through worksheets and written activities were being used by less confident teachers because formative assessments via means of observation were easier. For new initiatives to shape correctly, professional trainings and workshops are required. Sufficient coaching and support must be made available to all members to transform education. Three SEL

curricula that could be integrated into kindergarten are Triple P (Positive Parenting Program), the Incredible Years Parent Management Training-Oregon Model, or Second Step. “The field of SEL includes a growing body of literature on human change, organizational change, and implementation science that has led to many lessons about how to best support teachers and schools that are developing their SEL competence and strategies.” (Miller et al., 2018, p. 23).

Conflicted relationships of parental and educator beliefs often result in a loss of trust. Parents and community stakeholders do not appreciate the idea of following the child’s lead in school settings allowing unique play to enhance academics. Meeting learning goals is commonly thought to promote academic achievement. Play is largely dependent on the degree of freedom and quality of the role of the teacher while allowing the child to explore. Bodrova (2008) discussed how play is restrictive of rules made by the players involved and within imaginative situations emersions of roles appear (p. 359).

One gap in the literature that has been reviewed included how districts could build content to intertwine play-based learning and social-emotional behaviors. Early childhood educators across the country are in agreeance that steps need to be taken for all students to be successful. Another missing piece that needs to be addressed is that of educational communities in the United States dealing with teacher professional development of play-based learning and social-emotional behaviors. There are private and public schools that are beginning to branch out and participate in play-based learning strategies. However, cities, states, the federal government, and other countries do not hold a holistic idea when it comes to teaching theories or developmental stages. Each local government may hold values and beliefs that differ from another and even though studies say the cultural divide differs in every region, each district should decide how to proceed appropriately.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Much of a child's learning takes place in social settings and those who develop skills early on tend to demonstrate academic accomplishments sooner than peers who are not in similar social situations. Oral language deficits alone damage comprehension which effects literacy. Parten (Parten, 1933, as cited in Wickstrom et al., 2019) took a developmental perspective and classified play-based upon the degree of social engagement and use of lay materials which followed discrete developmental stages (p. 287). Creation of a literacy rich setting combined with engaging play supported the findings that gains in oral language transpired. Rich experiences and background knowledge combined enhance children's development and provide opportunities. "The intent of developmentally appropriate practice is to integrate the teacher's and child's agenda to allow for meaningful engagements and satisfying and worthwhile learning" (Malone, 1999, p. 309).

Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013) wrote on how Vygotsky (2004) argued about the two types of human activities, reproductive and combinatorial, that give rise to new objects, ideas, and emotional experiences. These ideas pertained to creating connections from real world environmental situations. Both reproductive and combinatorial activities are necessary for building a strong connection in development and learning. The authors' project portrayed that reproductive activity alone was inadequate in generating new ideas and combinatorial activity deemed sustainable. Through development over time, words are recognized because of past encounters that occur both visually and vocally. Hruby and Goswami (2011) discussed some of the neurolinguistic research base which suggests comprehension and word identification begin with relating a word to a picture.

As mentioned earlier, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development showed a relationship between play and developmental progression. Free play offers learning that stimulates oral language and sharing knowledge between peers in the classroom. Pyle et al. (2018) agreed that free play allows children to take the lead in carrying out a plan and adjusting along the way from successes or failures. Self-regulation and oral language skills can improve when children are engaged in peer play. With minimal adult involvement, children tend to explore freely to gain experience with decision making and build confidence experimenting in unfamiliar situations. Pyle et al. (2018) discussed how using guided play suggests teachers' involvement can integrate purposeful and directed learning within children's play by taking on different roles to scaffold academic learning by offering comments and addressing curricular content in a playful manner. Demonstrations, in leading games for example, can enhance skills and foster literacy strategies that motivate a more naturalistic learning.

Hesterman and Targowska (2020) wrote about how children's interests paired with intentional teaching and engagement of those interests proved to reveal positive responses from students. The authors go on about how play assisted with memory and language skill development facilitating readiness for formal learning at school. Early childhood education (ECE) should satisfy a child's natural curiosity that is inclusive to play for appropriate development. Exploration and active participation allow for school and peer experiences to connect with their lived experiences.

The Froebellian view, mentioned by Little & Cohen-Vogel (2016), stated, "Play guided by a well-trained, motherly teacher should build morally, industrious children" (p. 3). Concerns with the shift in early childhood education conveys the foundation is transforming and there should be a change. According to child development specialists from the Urban Child Institute

(UCI, n.d.), young minds develop beginning at birth, while exposure and experiences start at home via parents and other family members. Hruby and Goswami (2011) stated, "Localized correlates of neural activity may indicate convergence zones for networks of necessary activation that extends across the brain" (p. 158). Developmentalists and academic advocates disputed ideas surrounding social-emotional well-being and skill content. Early beginnings revealed that at one point in time "kindergarten focused on spiritual and character development during what Froebel believed was a particularly malleable period of life, ages four to six" (Little & Cohen-Vogel, 2016, p. 4). Principles of socializing children intertwined with learning goals forced extending kindergarten from part day to full day.

DeLuca et al. (2020) advised that shifts in education are pushing toward a developmentally appropriate pedagogy play adoption that should be considered a right for early learners. "A consistent approach to teacher education nationwide based on high standards for the initial preparation, licensing, and certification of teachers promotes professionalism linked to K-12 standards" (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001, p. 3). In 2001, the pressure of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) brought alignment reform shoving rigorous content into kindergarten. Regarding kindergarten specifically, Coburn, (2001) as cited in Little and Cohen-Vogel (2016) submitted that logics of instruction refer to:

> goals for instruction, underlying epistemological assumptions about the nature of learning, conceptions of teacher and student roles, schemas or scripts that organize instruction, as well as specific instructional practices and materials that become bundled together and gain legitimacy in the environment at a particular historical moment. (p.10)

Again, Vygotsky's (1978) zones of proximal development was centered on the idea that social interactions among children nurture transitions of understanding. Piaget's (Piaget &

Inhelder, 1969) stages of cognitive development suggest a maturity rate connection with environmental stimuli. Hatcher et al. (2012) studied parental beliefs and confirmation appeared that parents thought kindergarten should be focused on building reading and math strengths. Themes of the importance of kindergarten arose and factors included in the list were: social and emotional factors, language and literacy skills, and the essential role of preschool. Hesterman and Targowska (2020) studied theories of implementing play and found "the position that developmentally appropriate play experiences were key to children's learning and development" (p. 31). Additionally, the authors stated, "play assists memory and language skill development facilitating readiness for formal learning at school and promotes positive attitudes towards schooling" (Hesterman & Targowska, 2019, p. 33). Results from this study presented a balance of teaching intentionally and offering child-centered learning opportunities influence play-based learning.

A point not considered in these reviews was that early childhood educators need administrators to be on board with the integration of play interlaced with social-emotional learning. Teachers are unable to make this transition alone and administrators often have duties that surpass the time required to investigate play-based strategy implementation. The time needed to build a developmentally appropriate pathway was another relevant point not discussed. Also, the absence of a suitable definition for "developmentally appropriate" implies restrictions for early childhood education because it is subjective.

Play-Based Learning in Kindergarten

The history of play has yet to be sustained due to historical and philosophical beliefs about the best way to integrate it. Formal schooling develops skills and behaviors but unstructured play advocates for discovery and learning to enjoy learning. Hesterman and

Targowska (2019) discussed the idea behind play-based learning as part of children's rights. "Play facilitates the integration of language, socio-emotional, physical and creative learning with cognitive skills and contributes to improved self-regulation, and a sense of agency" (Hesterman & Targowska, 2019, p. 32). "Invoking a spirit of play and utilizing children's interest put us in the advantageous position of better understand our students" (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 108). Past research they found had shown benefits of play during school. Neurological growth and cognitive development were points in the article, along with the benefits of play-based learning, organizational skills and problem solving.

Knowing the interests and needs of the students provides important background as to what modeling needs to happen and how fostering enrichment promotes freedom. Bautista et al. (2019) discussed how play is like an accomplished cultural activity which follows specific rules and has actors. The authors go on to talk about how teachers should not participate because if freedom is truly allowed, children's needs will lead the learning (p. 717). The role teachers take on during play-based learning can vary dependent on the desired outcome wanted and from witnessing prior knowledge (or lack of) sculpt reasoning. By offering quality feedback that grants effective supports, the teacher can act as an observer, a manager, a partner, or a leader. "Teachers should actively participate in proposed activities to reinforce and/or extend children's thinking and learning, hence acting more as facilitators and guides" (Bautista et al., 2019, p. 720). As an observer, the teacher simply watches the activities as they unfold, but in the leader role the teacher enthusiastically joins in. As a manager and partner, the teacher kindly makes suggestions and asks questions while in either of those minor roles. Facilitating how to think, reason, and solve problems at a young age builds confidence and inquisitive capabilities.

Rethinking the ‘educational theory’ that is in place means embracing challenges of changing values and societal beliefs. Reviewing instruction ‘involves a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming relationships in the classroom, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state” (Sathorar & Geduld, 2018, p. 3). Stakeholders in education are curious about how child-centered versus teacher-directed learning affects children, how purposeful play can be made a priority, and the aspects of environmental learning. “Administrators must invite teachers to join the front lines of change and give them opportunities to act upon their ideas. Give schools and teachers space to ensure ‘learning organizations’ create results that disrupt the traditional structure” (Bridich, 2016, p. 12). The recalibration of curricular programs has increased academic skills and adaptations from NCLB have forced rigor into a formal scene. Graue (2009) stated,

> The purpose of kindergarten reflected beliefs about how children learn, specialized training for kindergarten teachers, and working mothers. Noisy, messy, and playful – kindergarten was all the things we associate with young children. This special status held kindergarten apart as a place in between, not quite home and not quite school. If focused on supporting children’s interests and skills. (p. 29)

Pyle et al. (2018) investigated teacher perspectives on integration of literacy into play-based techniques, alongside classroom practices with a range of behaviors within three educative contexts: direct instruction, guided play, and free play (p. 220). Outcomes proved free play assisted with skill development, direct instruction was not as effective due to a shortage of clarity in expectations, and guided play seemed immaterial. “The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) identified several core literacy skills as essential for the acquisition of reading ability, including

alphabetics, fluency, and text comprehension" (Pyle et al., 2018, p. 221). Emergent readers follow a phonological process including strong vocabulary skills. Each skill builds off the one before and requires direct instruction, even so the notion of using free or guided play is being explored for the independent promotion of learning.

Different strategies used to observe play-based learning in kindergarten are becoming more relevant. Purposeful play balances the importance of play with direct instruction from teachers. Bergen (2013) described play as having "elements inclusive of flexibility, positive affect, nonliterality, and intrinsic motivation" (p. 45). Imaginative play frequency and play practice strategies are theories that are being tested in other countries, some of which are mandating standards of implementation. Keung and Cheung (2019) stated, "With play an integral part of the kindergarten curriculum, ensuring high quality of play-based learning can help children's acquisition of knowledge and skills" (p. 630). In the early 1900s, Dr. Maria Montesorri emphasized independence with hands-on learning and self-directed activities. Vygotsky (1978) and Montesorri (1909) have been labeled constructionists due to their similar beliefs that children build their own knowledge through experiences. "A main strength of free play is providing the opportunities to practice skills and internalize ideas, allowing children to direct their learning towards their interests" (Wickstrom et al., 2019, p. 291). Another study that suggested constructivism was that of Reggio-inspired approaches which were student-centered, experiential, and looked for relationships driven by environmental facets (Sunday & Conley, 2020).

Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2011) focused on the three types of play which were labeled as open-ended, modelled, and purposefully framed. These terms are defined as:

> Open-ended play involves teachers providing children with materials related to particular concepts derived from environmental education and allowing children to use the materials to create their own understandings of the concepts. Modelled play involves teachers 'showing' children how to use the materials to illustrate environmental education concepts prior to allowing the children to use the materials themselves. Purposefully framed play involves teachers providing children with opportunities to use the materials as well as participating in modelled-play experiences. (p. 54)

Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2011) followed an educator in Australia who used all three of the types of learning in a scaffolding manner, based more on the outside environment rather than free choice centers. These types of studies have become more prominent because the importance of social-emotional skill development could be used to help meet academic and curricular needs. Positive responses from children participating in PBL are inspiring. "Relationships built show children are more likely to say they enjoy attending school and claim that in a play-based environment, they feel better adjusted to the school setting and are excited to engage" (Hesterman & Targowska, 2019, p. 38). With more parents working and being absent from the home, the skills usually instilled from 'at-home parents' are disappearing, which means early childhood educators are vital due to this role change.

Exploratory practices incorporating play into the education continuum are being developed and preschool appears to be one important piece where those play routines were occurring. Wang and Lam (2017) shared that play needs to be completely child-initiated with a continuum of activities ranging from free play through work. Parents believed that school environments need to be adjusted in some fashion, however the professional training and experiences teachers bring to this picture deem key in preparing educational materials

surrounding play. Play-based program planning is beginning to take shape as teachers unwrap connections between maturity and education. “By playing with peers, children share routines, values and experiences that are linked to communicating and language” (Syrjamaki et al., 2019, p. 560). Building a growth mindset through play creates flexibility and resilience, so teachers must embrace the challenge to change.

In the past, play occurred in kindergarten without it being pinpointed and was an important step in building social mannerisms that are missing today. The literature reviewed did not discuss specific behavior changes that occurred during play. Social-emotional behaviors and academic learning were also not recorded in these studies. There was also very little to no attention given to administrators or their opinions regarding play-based learning.

Structured and Unstructured Play

Inattention and disruptive behaviors are critiques of providing such detailed directions preventing children’s decisions that produce learning. Problem-solving skills and exploration become casualties with stringent structure and discourage foundational growth in developmental domains. “Differentiated instruction seeks to maximize each student’s growth by recognizing that students have different ways of learning, different interests and different ways of responding to instruction” (Lauria, 2010, p. 24). Curby, LoCasale-Crouch, et al. (2009) believed that sensitive teachers understand when students are struggling or need extra support then appropriately respond with varied activities (p. 348). “We found that children’s reading and writing behaviors became more purposeful in the literacy-enriched play environment” (Neuman & Roskos, 1990, p. 218).

Kindergarten teaching allows for both structured and unstructured play to occur. “Vygotsky argues that there are two types of human activities that give rise to new objects, ideas

and emotional experiences" (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013, p. 330). By watching students explore with play-based materials provided, teachers can see what students know. This leads teachers to the incorporation of defining specific items as needed for meeting standards and continuing to build on the knowledge students present. Breathnach et al. (2016) stated, "The important role of adults in supporting and guiding children's learning through play, tensions borne out of differing educational beliefs, practices and orientations can result in ambiguity as to when and how teachers should involve themselves in play" (p. 78). Professors from several colleges stated that the idea of structured play-based learning encompasses adult-led specific tasks that can be physical and/or cognitive and convey play with an explicit purpose that is set to meet an objective or solve a particular problem (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013, pp. 332-334).

Materials offered can be used as the child wants, constructing knowledge by exercising deeper thinking as connections form between things that work or do not. Teacher-directed (guided) play facilitated play scenarios with predetermined outcomes and was a collaborative experience between the teacher and child, working to optimize critical thinking and meeting curricular objectives (Wickstrom et al., 2019, pp. 287-288). With the support of teachers, guided play still offers freedom to children, only relying on the teacher as an inquirer who encourages by building questioning techniques rather than offering meanings. This form of collective play brought an extension to imaginative processes by bridging prior knowledge and experiences to all involved.

According to Little and Cohen-Vogel (2016), kindergarten "should have plenty of space and time for unstructured play and discovery in order to practice social skills" (p. 14). Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013) also stated, "play adds important insights into discussion regarding

the construction of conceptual knowledge through child and adult engagements during play" (p. 330). Historically, our world has changed in numerous ways and as of late, technology is on the top of the list when it comes to concerns of student learning and deficits in social interactions. Spontaneous, playful experiences often bring happiness to children. "Experiential teachers create classroom conditions that stimulate personal interest, integrate values, and allow for autonomy while offering a supportive and rich, stimulating environment with sensitive emotional encouragement" (de Bilde et al., 2015, p. 174). Some educators and theorists felt that the whole child approach including play-based learning will affect academic outcomes on standardized tests.

With play-based learning techniques being considered a relatively new phenomenon, very little research has been completed that has depth regarding specific strategies, implementation, and social-emotional learning. Both structured and unstructured play involve trial and error methods based on prior knowledge of the students. Teachers must be willing to try new procedures that encourage a less structured plan. The literature is missing the attention needed to discuss how educators could build a program or curriculum related to play-based learning strategies.

Social-Emotional Learning and Proficiencies

"The Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) defined social-emotional development as the developing capacity of the child from birth through 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways." (CSEFEL, 2008, as cited in Ashdown & Bernard, 2011, p. 397). Educators tried to understand the social world and determine the needs of students based on their cultural components. Similarly, these same educators constructed

meaning based on understanding they held due to experiences and choices. Interaction with peers is vital to proper growth, perceptions arise that may differ from family values and forming opinions helps children with problem solving. “Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a comprehensive intervention paradigm used to support children with a focus on managing emotions, experiencing empathy, pursuing goals, and effectively navigating interpersonal relationships” (CASEL, 2012, as cited in Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2017, p. 289).

The competencies of social-emotional learning include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Ashdown and Bernard (2011) found that “social-emotional competence was a significant predictor of five-year-old children’s levels of reading achievement” (p. 398). Positive effects on not only cognitive but also academic outcomes indicated that there is a need for social-emotional programs in today’s educational programs. Several programs were available to educators, however, one program commonly utilized in classrooms and included in this research was called Second Step. “Second Step utilizes explicit and implicit learning strategies to promote critical social-emotional and executive functioning skills which are related to academic and life success” (Low et al., 2019, p. 416). With grade specific curricular standards, the Second Step program can help teachers model and deliver developmentally appropriate social-emotional skills relevant to their students. The sense of belonging to a peer group, which is an innate human need, suggests social interactions and participation in a group is vital to collaboration. Sharing routines and values with other children boosts new thinking and builds positive relationships.

Vygotsky (1966) presented his socio-cultural theory regarding the impact of social interactions within a community on children while Piaget’s (1993) social theory is related and includes the importance of peer interaction. Emotions are a portion of a child’s growth and to

prepare young children for life challenges educators must look to improve resilience in social settings. Mraz et. al. (2016) claimed, “Empathy is our ability to feel what another person is feeling combined with an ability to take on another’s perspective” (p. 51). While teachers have been asked to help incorporate social-emotional learning into lessons and daily functions, properly trained counselors offer an assortment of systematic courses.

Herbert Blumer (1958) and Erving Goffman (1959) have additional information to share regarding social development. Blumer’s (Inkelas, 2003) studies have shown that humans use actions from meanings they have gained when in specific social settings. They interpret those ideas learned from said interactions on how to think and act due to socially created experiences. Lack of social collaboration would hinder this type of growth. Goffman (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) believed humans are playing a role on the stage of life, claiming, “People are pawns in a play that have different faces for different acts, in so doing, humans create an acceptable social image when presented with social interactions” (pp.102-103).

The growing trend of social-emotional learning with curriculums unfamiliar to teachers and lack of school counselors and/or social workers to offer guidance poses yet another concern in schools. “Emotional support refers to the ways in which teachers foster positive classroom climate, minimize negative climate, attend sensitively to individual student needs and emphasize interests” (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009, p. 913). Teachers who offer support and interventions specific to both academic and emotional needs adapt plans on the fly, being sympathetic to expressive ideas and individuality of each circumstance. To improve understanding for all stakeholders in the social-emotional learning domain, time must be allotted for proper techniques to develop. Social-emotional programs need time to be practiced by both students and teachers. Working on the reinforcement of skills should be documented on a time

frame beneficial to all parties involved to prove the value. Low et al. (2019) found that improvements in social-emotional skills and associated classroom behavior should allow teachers more time for instruction and increased academic engagement, leading to gains.

A restriction tied together that may influence the adoption of SEL programs was a lack of assessments and few counselors to lead the courses. School counselors seem to be experiencing burnout due to the heavy workload involved with balancing the job requests of SEL programs and the emotional demands of students. Bardhoshi and Um (2020) identified stressors leading to burnout for school counselors with all the individual characteristics or aspects of the self that are linked to resiliency in the workplace leading to successful control of the work environment, self-efficacy has been identified as one of the most prominent factors (p. 290). The ability to overcome difficulty is necessary for successful service delivery (of students' lessons) and resources must be readily available to counselors to accomplish goals. Eklund et al. (2018) discussed social-emotional assessment research is needed to support the development of student strengths and weaknesses but is quite restricted because it lacks psychometric evidence (p. 325).

Wood (2020) and Haymovitz et al. (2018) agreed that social skills are largely cultural. Values from the home and school must be included in forming communities of learners that have what they claim to be considered emotional intelligence. Wood (2020) discussed how the ability to control one's emotions, self-awareness, motivation, and empathy should be dealt with and addressed as parts of an effective communication system. Teachers can be trained to model appropriate behaviors in which students practice restoring lost relationships while addressing emotional issues. Haymovitz et al. (2018) suggested using restorative methods to repair damaged connections is a nonviolent conflict resolution method that builds accountability (p. 46). The school and families then become a whole school community where yet another culture is

introduced. Teachers and parents must understand experiences and perceptions will vary and clash, however being open with communication will direct and create positive cultures.

With the shortage of counselors, missing assessments for SEL, and lack of proper training, the social-emotional piece has reared its importance in educational settings at an alarming rate. The push for success in school includes emotional learning, however few programs for SEL are available and training teachers cannot happen without professional counselors. Little research around the topic of assessing these skills leads to behavioral observations and vague screenings that tend to link academic outcomes with feelings that are difficult to uncover.

Individual Circumstances

Kindergarten skills are largely environmental and regional, dependent on factors such as where the child and family live in the world, socio-economic status, and education level of parents. Diverse settings offer diverse learning scenarios which rely on family participation, failing to provide a universal one-size-fits all description. Differing perspectives regarding kindergarten revolve around four conceptions: the idealist/nativist view, the empiricist view, the social constructionist view, and the interactionist view (Brown & Lan, 2018, pp. 404-405). Family interpretations of school and strengths their children bring when entering school often clash with the skills desired and sought by teachers. Some of those misconceptions are due to socio-economic status and/or cultural background so a shift in thinking must occur. Wang and Lam (2017) stated, “Indigenization occurs when imported ideologies are implemented in ways that meet the cultural expectation of the local group. Transformation of localized cultural context practices results in cultural hybridity” (p. 31).

Brown and Lan (2018) explained those four perspectives build an understanding of education angles. The idealist/nativist perspective framed readiness as from within the child and their developmental level while the empiricist view claimed readiness lies outside the child with teachers and/or families preparing the unready children for success. The social constructionist perspective looked at the community piece whereas the interactionist perspective considered the child's contributions to schooling and the school's contributions to the child (Brown & Lan, 2018). Culture and families' opinions impact the educational path because parents play a key role in the education puzzle as students' first teachers.

"Because social interaction opportunities for young children often occur in the context of play, the role of play, in particular center-based and free-play experiences in preschools, remains essential to meeting the social readiness goals most parents and teachers express for preschoolers" (Hatcher et al., 2012, p. 9). A related article showed how a teacher used play practices for social and emotional development. Learning how to play nicely and talk through problems were parts of her flexible curricular stance which integrated necessary foundational skills. Pyle & Bigelow (2015) claimed that socialization prepared students for the learning of academic standards.

Nativist views held by some parents became altered by the "implementation of local, state, and national standards-based accountability reforms as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). To prepare children for school success, the parental role changed, and families need to prepare these students for school" (Brown & Lan, 2018, pp. 410-411). Their idea of readiness may not match academic and social expectations put in place by school districts. The old 'nurture versus nature' philosophy has in turn affected educators because originally kindergarten was for socialization. Brown and Lan (2018) acknowledged a parent who stated, "The state and how

policymakers' demands to rush children to grow up and be successful in school creates an impression that children must possess specific skills to be deemed ready for school" (p. 412). Negative impacts orbiting the idea of school show the failure of policymakers to embrace the variety of sociocultural talents by pin-holing such tight learning experiences; more times than not, children have understanding to offer and build upon. By identifying 'at-risk' students early on, schools can detect gaps in families' beliefs and offer support upon entrance.

Environmental education also relates to spaces in which children explore including the outdoors where acts of discovery, exploration, and risk-taking foster appreciation of the natural world. Richard Louv (2008) wrote a book titled, "Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" which is dedicated to the shortfalls children bring to school by not having been exposed to the outside world. The natural environment itself offered the chance for exploration of all the senses and children today are simply not outside playing. Louv (2008) addressed fears of parents about changes in society (i.e., not being able to let your kids play outside unsupervised due to strangers), technological restraints, and busy-ness of parents with adult jobs. Similarly, Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2011) researched play-based learning inclusive to the natural environment and stated, "Some studies are difficult to relate to children's contemporary experiences, given the pace of the last two decades where children are living in textual, visual, virtual, and highly digitalized worlds" (p. 52).

Providing authentic experiences to meet the diverse needs of all students teachers encounter poses a challenge when planning play-based stations and maturation fluctuates regionally. With the wide span of interests and background knowledge of families, development is influenced by the person, time, and the context of every single child. "Proximal processes investigated involve the person model, referring to the uniqueness of the child; the time

dimension, referring to repeated exposure over extended time; the context influences that come from natural environments" (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009, p. 913).

"In looking at changes in activation with age, the (neurological) study finds that the left temporal and frontal areas show patterns that can be interpreted that reading-related activity becomes left lateralized with development" (Hruby & Goswami, 2011, p. 160). Implicit tasks in reading are processed using both auditory and visual symbols; in addition, different brain areas develop skills as they are activated. "Carreiras and colleagues suggested that the oft-reported reduction in gray matter in the left temporoparietal areas associated with neural activity may be completely linked to reading expertise" (Hruby & Goswami, 2011, p.162). Diamond and Whitington (2015) claimed, "Everyone should be made to learn about brain development in the early years" (p. 13).

President Kennedy's (later Johnson's) Head Start design in the 1960s was meant to overcome the poverty cycle, improving self-sufficiency by offering educational training for impoverished individuals plus persuading parents to become involved in the process of educating young children. The working parent continuum suggested that children need longer school days which commands starting kindergarten as soon as possible. Lee et al. (2006) examined how kindergarten is rarely a child's first school experience but rather a routine that begins with daycare, preschool or prekindergarten, and moves into elementary school. Determination of developmentally appropriate age required a sophisticated level of interaction between teachers and parents. Fletcher and Kim (2016) found that specific cutoff ages for enrollment, curriculums used, preschool attendance, and socio-economic status vary in every state.

Morris et al. (2018) maintained that the skills and capabilities acquired from the child's home are concepts that relate to the developmental idea so those who come from underprivileged

backgrounds may be less knowledgeable in various academic areas. Over time, upbringings shaped children and their overall wellbeing is highly reflective their home. Kalifeh et al. (2011) reported that antipoverty agendas reinforced the idea that the poor were 'culturally deprived' hoping to break the cycle by adding early childhood education for all (pp. 39-42). Similar thoughts from Brown and Mowry (2009) focused on at-risk students which included those "living in a family with a low household income, not having English as the first language, being homeless, or having a parent who is active in the U.S. military" (p. 174).

Families are a part of an environmental triangle in attaining this competency. The inclusion of varying backgrounds and abilities are other keys in education that influence development. Keung & Cheung (2019) found that teachers often encountered difficulties in convincing parents about the benefits of play in learning, especially in unstructured free play. Their study led to show the teacher's role was a factor in constructing authentic play practices and assessment relied on observation skills specifically labeled for behaviors. Keung & Cheung (2019) tried to promote a type of 'parents as teachers' program which invited parents in for an introduction of educating the 'whole child' allowing the child to role play as a teacher. Schools worked with parents to share learning ideas and build supportive relationships; in building comfortable settings for relaxed conversations, parents' stress levels decreased helping set up communication in case formal conversations are necessary.

One gap here lies in the area that hardly any studies used action research. Another gap was that limited amounts of research were available involving United States student populations especially those of small, rural towns. Little research was available on creative potential for children in the age ranges of 4-6. "There is strong evidence suggesting a critical period in the

first ten years of life where young children are considered to be in a creative stage when the brain is still wiring" (Leggett, 2017, p. 846).

Summary

Chapter two discussed how both theoretical and empirical evidence pointed to the beneficial development of kindergarten students both socially and academically when play-based learning is utilized. The growth of vocabulary and language skills along with mathematical concepts illustrated play pedagogies that support a continuum meeting curricular standards and including engaging choices for all learners. Studies across early childhood contexts validated the value of play and potential academic and social-emotional outcomes. Teachers who enable children to be independent by offering purposeful activities that prompt higher level thinking advocate for a central developmentally appropriate component to learning.

Chapter three will discuss the research questions and lay out the design of this study. Participants will be described along with statements about the procedures taking place. Data collection and analysis of behaviors that occur during allotted play times will occur. By using several classrooms, multiple case studies will be compiled to look for patterns noted by the researcher and by comparing and collaborating with teachers involved. Criteria for inclusion and coding labels containing behaviors and thematic studies will be listed in tables and described.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Play-based learning acknowledges voluntary activities chosen by children. Structure and predictability in the classroom are familiar to teachers yet the value of play-based learning can allow children to feel powerful. Play-based learning is enjoyable and may not be connected to a direct learning goal (Mraz et al., 2016). Imagination and exploration call for developmentally appropriate practices to prepare young children for success in the natural world (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). The impact of play through repetitive experiences can shape social-emotional behaviors by offering scenarios for needed practice. Two types of play, child-led (unstructured) and teacher-directed (structured), have the potential to affect social-emotional learning and academic growth. Social-emotional behaviors discussed by Almon & Miller (2011) are "on the rise with lack of play and a hurried curriculum; the examination of aggressive behavior seems to be leading to more expulsions in kindergarten classrooms is being linked to mastery pressure of academics" (p. 1). This chapter houses the research questions, methodology and design of the research, site description, participant selection, data collection, analysis procedures, positionality, trustworthiness, and credibility.

Research Questions

With behaviors emerging in the classroom and growing literacy gaps, one debate surrounds whether the rigor of the curriculum is not developmentally appropriate causing these disruptions. "Behavior is not what a person does to be intentionally bad or naughty; it is a person's way of communicating a developmental need that had not been met" (Diamond & Whitington, 2015, p. 14). Goldstein (2007) stated, "The most notable curricular change is the standards' strong emphasis on the development of academic skills, pressuring teachers to reduce recess to provide more academic time" (p. 381). In this play-based study, child-led (unstructured)

and teacher-directed (structured) learning methods were utilized and blended with academic skills to observe how students' behaviors in the classroom were affected. Within the parameters of this study, the goal was to find ways play-based learning influenced social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills by incorporating either structured or unstructured play stations. The research questions were:

Overarching Question: What happens when play-based learning strategies are implemented in a kindergarten classroom?

RQ1: What ways, if any, will using play-based learning assist with social-emotional behavior development in kindergarten students?

RQ2: How does play-based learning impact literacy skills in kindergarten students?

Research Design

Action research was the method used in this study which allowed me as the researcher to actively participate as needed in various roles. Having the flexibility to adjust my role as either the observer or participant according to student needs showed me ways to improve my teaching practices and integrate content more diversely. One definition from Efron and Ravid (2020) stated, "Action research is usually defined as an inquiry conducted by educators in their own setting in order to advance their practice and improve their students learning" (p. 2). Clark et al. (2020) defined action research several ways stating, "these definitions highlight distinct features of action research and emphasize the purposeful intent of action researchers to improve, refine, reform, and problem solve issues in their educational context" (p 15). Although no results listed in this study are specific to the teacher collaboration that occurred, the shared goal of implementing play strategies was established to stimulate higher level thinking and problem solving.

Using action research let transformative changes occur readily, and throughout the course of this study, play-based learning altered my delivery of the curriculum. The completed study examined how the implementation of play-based learning strategies in my kindergarten classroom relieved stressful social situations and inspired literacy advancement. Another part included planning sessions with other teachers, where I was able to compare experiences they were having and collaborate on how to best help students. The cyclical process action research entails of planning, observing, acting, reflecting, and evaluating helped me be thoughtful and aware of every situation. It helped organized my thoughts based on behavior or literacy outcomes of students seen in data collection and analysis. Teachers encounter ambiguous situations daily and in using action research, I was able to be emergent and responsive. This allowed me to generate ideas as problems occurred and react to situations that I had witnessed or experienced dependent on the role I was in.

Through observations and field notes during play, data from participants were observed and transcribed to discover impacts of play on social-emotional behavior development and literacy skills. Changes in these behaviors were documented during play sessions to look for patterns that helped formulate coding themes that related to selected social-emotional standards. Reflections from my reflective journaling on personal development and adaptations to pedagogy were recorded daily. Being able to understand why those teaching patterns occurred and continually improving techniques after reviewing notes was also a self-reflective piece of this action research study. The idea of being responsive to my students helped me construct a practice I want to continue using. Even though the analysis of all the data sources was time consuming, being critical in the reflection process was vital because it allowed me to step back and take a holistic approach to my teaching style. “Action researchers are generators of knowledge. As

enactors of knowledge, practitioners are professionals who are capable of making informed decisions based on their own inquires" (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 7).

As a researcher, I relied on literature reviews and theorists to present meaningful relationships as a foundation from which to build on and compare relevant data for this study. I used reflective journaling to assist with evolving ideas as they occurred while I participated. I studied my students interacting with predetermined play stations and their peers. Understanding topic concepts and working cooperatively were recorded to explain results. Since action research was the primary methodology used in my study and the qualitative findings were my interpretations, the idea was "'not to find the correct or true interpretation' of the facts, but rather to eliminate erroneous conclusions so that one is left with the best possible, the most compelling, interpretation" (Bromley, 1986, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2017, p.109).

"Action research allows educators to learn through their actions with the purpose of developing personally or professionally" (Clark et al., 2020, p. 11). Action research also allowed for collaboration with others to occur, and with the iterative nature, it permitted change to happen immediately. When using action research, I was cautious of bias while improving teaching strategies and constructing new ideas in a professional manner. "Disciplined subjectivity invites you to acknowledge your personal preconceived ideas with regard to this study and to monitor your biases" (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 76). Action research is systematically based on an identified problem where data collection and results aim to improve practices. Qualitative findings were used to interpret results and offered descriptive insight on how play-based learning could change the educational experiences of kindergarten students emotionally and academically. This play-based learning study offered both descriptive and informative elements of students' actions, behaviors, and knowledge. Figure 3.1 outlines the

design timeline of this study. Appendix C provides a list of materials that assisted me in determining the best research method to use to improve my own practices and model as needed for students.

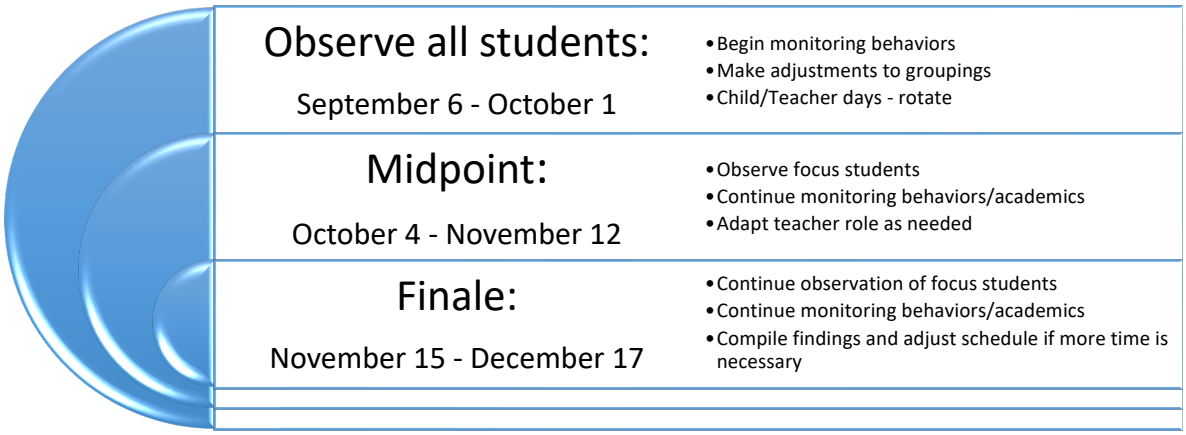

Figure 3.1. Design Timeline

In choosing action research, I was able to capture real scenarios and adapt as needed. In reviewing complied notes, I began noticing that results may need narration to guide the qualitative aspects of the students' attitudes and motivation. As a researcher, I wanted to not only understand behaviors in students but also improve my own teaching style. I was interested in finding out if play supported the curriculum used in my classroom and how I could incorporate new teaching strategies involving play to enhance academics. By having a constructivist view, I was able to observe my students interpreting materials, directions, and situations in their educational world at their pace. Crotty (1998) stated, "Obviously, it is possible to make sense in quite different ways. What constructivism drives home unambiguously is there is no true or valid interpretation" (p. 47). Child-led (unstructured) play allowed for freedom of choice in stations and students could interact in natural developmentally appropriate ways with peers and no adult interruptions.

During collaborative planning sessions with colleagues, I reviewed kindergarten standards for literacy (KSDE, 2017) from Kansas Standards for English Language Arts; science (KSDE, 2013) in the Next Generation Science Standards; social studies (KSDE, 2020) in Kansas History, Government, and Social Studies Standards; and social-emotional development (KSDE, 2018, -b) in Kansas Social, Emotional, and Character Development Model Standards in relation to the curriculum that my district uses to plan play stations (see table 3.1). Having a checklist beside me offered an outline to meet all necessary requirements. I received approval to proceed with this study from the Instructional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix D) and from my district. After looking at the school calendar, a timeline was created (see table 3.1) and approval from parents with informed consent (see Appendix E) allowed minor-aged students to be analyzed. Community members were invited in to present and work with students to bridge real life exploration.

Table 3.1. Units of Study

Date / Hours = 19 weeks / 38 hours	Unit

• September 6 – 24
  o 6 hours
• September 27 – October 8
  o 4 hours
• October 11 – 22
  o 4 hours
	• Community Helpers
	  o Dentist, doctor, veterinarian
	• Community Helpers
	  o Construction worker, army
	• Community Helpers
	  o Fire, police, post office

• October 25 – November 5
  o 4 hours
• November 8 – 19
  o 4 hours
• November 22 – December 3
  o 4 hours
	• Store
	  o Bakery, ice cream parlor, donut shop
	• Store
	  o Fast food restaurant, pizza place
	• Store
	  o Grocery

• December 6 – 17
  o 4 hours
• January 3 – 28
  o 8 hours
	• Polar Unit
	  o Igloos
	• Polar Unit
	  o Ice fishing, animals, habitats

Making connections with our community was a pivotal point in planning this study. Jobs were picked purposefully so parents and community members could come in to share, relating play topics to real life and deepen those connections for students. Each topic lent itself to asking someone to come in and speak to share about these jobs. A local veterinarian, our school nurse, two carpenters, a baker, a school board member, a principal, and a parent who was a doctor came to speak with the students during the community helpers unit. Students were able to share what we were doing in planned play stations and experts were able to give ideas, expanding knowledge beyond the classroom. With the growth of student knowledge from outside presenters on the play topics, a better understanding of the professions students learned about helped with working through problems and communicating in the classroom.

This study started with planning play-based stations and coming up with a timeline for completion (see figure 3.1). After reviewing the science (Next Generation Science Standards, KSDE, 2013) and social studies (Kansas History, Government, and Social Studies Standards, KSDE, 2020) standards for kindergarten as listed on the Kansas State Department of Education website (KSDE, n.d.), a list of topics and materials were either created with supplies or ordered with funds received through grant writing. In order to study more careers, combining community helpers with similar tools and duties allowed for more topics to be covered. In addition, as data points were collected during this study using students' background knowledge, similarities in job roles and tools were uncovered.

The main topics chosen for the play-based study were 1) community helpers, 2) stores, and 3) polar unit (see figure 3.2 for more specific roles). Play items were sorted and combined for community helpers by dentist, doctor, veterinarian, construction worker, army, fire fighter, police, and post office (see Appendix A). Since play-based learning is open ended and voluntary,

no specific goals or purpose were set when planning occurred. A list of vocabulary was designed to examine topic knowledge and job roles were outlined (see Appendix A). Stations were planned so students could choose what they wanted to play with and when. This study was intended to examine how play influenced the development of social skills and if play motivated students to be self-learners with free exploration.

Figure 3.2. Thematic Units

Play stations were designed to be child-led on Thursdays and teacher-directed on Fridays every week beginning September 6th unless there was a scheduling conflict. Child-led stations allowed freedom of choice between the five play stations provided, with a time limit of one hour to play. Play was always a part of the week during the science and social studies block of our schedule. Students were only told to play safely, but were offered no other suggestions for ideal free, unstructured play to occur. Students were introduced to each station with simple explanations of what was at each station (i.e., here are tools in a dentist's office, puzzles for sequencing a doctor visit, art supplies to decorate a cast/band aid, books, etc.). Play stations were set up within my kindergarten room at tables, desks, or on the floor usually dependent on the

space needed for that specific activity (see table 3.2). Those designated areas were assigned during child-led play to keep space between activities allowing for easier cleanup. Students were allowed to flow freely between stations with no boundaries of time or explicit rules, jobs, or responsibilities.

Participants were observed and recorded both days; however, on child-led days, notations of missing content knowledge (knowledge on specific topic) or proper use of tools or materials were made to address on teacher-directed days. Questions from child-led days regarding the content or tools were noted in field notes and students were encouraged to ask their peers first. Teacher-directed days provided modeling as needed and offered higher level thinking to occur with questioning techniques about presented topics. On these days, adults offered guidance as needed and led students with questions (see Appendix A) to promote higher level thinking. Adults were available to answer/ask questions, interact, and participate with the students as this study progressed.

Initially, the plan of action for the study was to use half of the days as child-led play days with the other half to be teacher-directed. This would have allowed seven hours for each type of play to occur. However, during the week of October 11th, observations noted that less teacher direction was required so I began being more of an active participant and modified my role according to the needs of the students. The other adults in the room also actively participated, but only as the students asked and the free exploration that took place on child-led days increased, replacing teacher-directed days. Many times, teacher direction was only used to encourage students to think by asking higher level questions or providing clues to get to the answer. Due to students' maturity over time, teacher-directed days were eliminated, and I interacted more as a

participant to expand on thinking that happens during play. The remainder of this study continued in this fashion.

All students in my classroom were observed the first few weeks of school for signs of inappropriate emotional behaviors and/or struggles in academics. The first two weeks of school were designed to establish a focus group to observe levels of social-emotional skills and academic abilities. After that two-week period, four focus students were chosen to complete this study. Common themes emerged from those four students' data regarding lack of collaboration, empathy, sharing, and topic knowledge. Three of the four students completed this study in its entirety, and one moved from the district, negating her from this study, so her results were not included. Each play topic was reviewed for a period of two to three weeks. Detailed descriptions of each child-led station are available in Appendix B.

Table 3.2. Unit Specifics

Unit/Description	Standards: HGSS NGSS, SECD	Instructional Objective	Materials	Station Activities	Presentation
Community Helpers: Dentist, doctor, veterinarian	K- Relationships among people are dynamic: connect to contemporary issues	Understand jobs and rules, Sharing, collaboration, Idea of 'community'	Appropriate tools/toys, pencils, vocabulary, stuffed animals, paper	Doctor rooms, waiting rooms, reception areas, writing, art, books, puzzles	Local vet School nurse Parent doctor
Community Helpers: Construction worker, Army	K - Sense of self: choices have consequences		Appropriate tools/toys, pencils, paper, vocabulary	Tool areas, playsets, writing, art, books, puzzles, fine motor	Staff spouses Parent - Army and battalion (vehicles)
Community Helpers: Fire, police, post office	K – Cultural: be around people who are different and be friendly		Appropriate tools/toys, pencils, paper, vocabulary	Play sets, mailbox, writing, art, books, puzzles, fine motor	Local firefighters and police officers
Stores: Bakery, ice cream parlor, donut shop	K – Social-emotional: mistakes are normal, ask for help, help those who feel hurt or sad	Understand local businesses, money, needs/wants	Appropriate food/toys, pencils, paper, vocabulary	Restaurant specific, writing, art, fine motor, math/count, books, puzzles	Staff sibling – bakery BOE member – ice cream/butter making
Stores: Fast food, pizza	K - Civic/Govt: rules, local business		Appropriate food/toys, pencils, paper, vocabulary	Restaurant specific, writing, art, fine motor, books, puzzles	
Stores: Grocery	K – Economic: goods/services, wants/needs, money, maps		Appropriate food/toys, pencils, paper, vocabulary	Grocery store, cash register section, writing, math, books, puzzles	Local grocery manager, newspaper
Polar Unit: Igloos, ice fishing, animals, habitats	K: Ecosystems, weather, climate	Plant animal relationships, environmental adaptations	Appropriate tools/toys, pencils, vocabulary, yogurt cups, bubble wrap, marshmallows, box	Build igloos, ice fishing, sensory tubs, writing, art, maps, books, puzzles	Principal – ice fishing discussion

Researcher Role

Since the 18-week study was looking to understand what happened when play-based learning strategies were implemented in the classroom, utilizing action research allowed for immediate changes to happen more naturally. In choosing action research as the methodology, I was able to participate in play strategies within my classroom and interact as needed during this study. Because I used my personal classroom, I was labeled as an insider-outsider researcher (IOR), which brought challenges and advantages. As part of the classroom community, I was considered an 'insider' and had a unique rapport that obtained more authentic data. I was considered an 'outsider' in the beginning since I did not know much about my students and by closely examining all findings looking for patterns.

According to Unluer (2012), "insider-researchers advantages include: a) having a greater understanding of the culture being studied, b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally, c) having an established intimacy promoting telling and judging of truths" (p. 1). As an insider-outsider researcher (IOR), according to guidelines listed by Nakata (2015), two aspects I really concentrated on were personal bias and comfort level of my own classroom swaying my reflection. In collection and analysis of data regarding my students, I was objective in trying to uncover and understand my own teaching techniques during this study to help validate results. By participating in action research as IOR, I gained a deeper reflective view of my own pedagogy and was able to grasp a better understanding of each individual student's learning style during this study. Nakata (2015) stated, "It is more important for researchers to delve deeper into their positioning, taking their background into consideration and critically looking at their own research" (p. 169).

As a researcher, I was looking for qualitative data points from the action research that occurred. I tested kindergarten students' knowledge of topics by planning play-based stations and observed behaviors while they played. This allowed me to function as both the researcher and as a participant as needed. As a participant in this action research study, I looked through notes for ways to improve my own teaching and was able to enhance the curriculum with experiences brought in by the students. I analyzed data derived from, but not limited to, student conversations, observations through video recordings or field notes, focus meetings with other teachers, and topic analysis with the specific themes. The timeline (see figure 3.1) was established for implementation of both child-led and teacher-directed times in the daily schedule with a variety of play stations being available. Integration of curricular items in a few of the play stations regarding literacy and math permitted adaptations for differentiation. Through collaborative planning, other kindergarten teachers in my building helped assemble stations and presenters so they could use them in their classrooms as well. In adding presentations, the outside community allowed for consideration of other views of the topics specific to this study.

Action research balances individual implementation with collaborative problem solving. As a classroom teacher, I am constantly trying to do anything I can to meet the needs of all students. Adapting content and my own teaching style during or after a lesson was something I have utilized since I began teaching. In keeping a reflective journal open on my desk to record changes, I am able to jot quick notes that either help clarify or enrich a lesson. Teaching requires continual alterations of curricular items and strategies due to the transient environment it represents. Incorporating student interests while teaching provides a feeling of empowerment and in offering those quality opportunities deepens a love of learning. Systematic observations of my

students coupled with behavioral pattern and literacy data collection helped me improve literacy strategies and explore ways to assist social-emotional growth.

Research Site

This study took place in an elementary school in a rural community with a predominantly White population that speaks English. The primary industries include agriculture, oil, and a facility that makes ethanol. The town is centrally located off a major interstate with bigger cities ranging from 30-60 miles away. There is one grocery store, three retail stores, churches, several restaurants and gas stations, and a few small businesses and hotels. The town's population at the time of research was approximately 4,400 people. Many students are bussed into the town for school. The school where the research took place had roughly 175 students in grades preschool through first grade. Within the building, there are two preschool rooms, one transitional kindergarten room, three kindergarten rooms, four first grade rooms, a Title/resource room, and a special education room.

The district where this study took place had approximately 60% of the entire student body qualifying for free/reduced lunches and only 12 English Language Learners (ELL) students. The district qualifies for Title I services, which support students in high poverty schools, including a Head Start program and an At-Risk preschool program. The most current enrollment numbers presented 781 students in the district. Teachers in this district are mainly White females, with a few male teachers at each level. The district has four buildings: one that houses Preschool through 1st grade, one that houses 2nd-5th grades, one that houses 6th-8th grades, and one that houses 9th-12th grades.

Participant Selection

The main contributors to this study were minor children of an elementary school in a Midwest rural town. Parental consent (see Appendix E) was obtained before this study took place due to the age of the participants. Initially when planning for this study, participants being considered were kindergarten students that were female or male, aged 5-6. The students were members of my kindergarten classroom which contained both White and Hispanic students. Characteristics of the participants included, but were not limited to, age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Exclusions from this study were moving out of the district and/or parental decline during the introductory consent process.

I began by observing several random samples of student groups in my classroom; notes were coded after watching video recordings, and behaviors were documented to look for positive and/or negative changes during play stations. After a specified time-limit of six weeks, the students were ranked due to academic knowledge of topics being used in the planned play stations with labels of high, medium, and low knowledge level. Then students were categorized based on inappropriate social-emotional behaviors in the same way. From those results, students were chosen for this study based on behavioral needs first then academics second. A convenient focus group of four students, two male and two female, was selected from the list to complete this study. One of the female students moved out of the district during this study, negating her participation; thus, this study includes data for three students. All participants' names and identities have been altered to protect anonymity within this study. A list of coding themes was started and modified during this study based on behaviors and knowledge. Categories considered for academics were vocabulary and understanding of related jobs. Categories considered for behaviors were on/off task behaviors during task completion and peer interactions. Being able to

use my own classroom and students was convenient and all parents were willing to allow participation in this study.

Jill

Jill, a White 6-year-old female who had been retained in kindergarten, was chosen after initial observations due to her lack of age-appropriate social-emotional behaviors, abrasive interactions with peers, and low academic scores. Her family fell in a very low socio-economic status and family communication with school rarely happened. Attendance at school was poor and Jill appeared unmotivated to learn when she was at school. She was very distracted during core academic time, and apathetic about work of any kind. I felt her initial data could offer good information in both the social-emotional and academic components.

Ian

Ian, a Hispanic 5-year-old male, was chosen after initial observations due to his age, ethnicity, language, independence, and lack of interactions with peers. Ian's family fell in the low socio-economic range with seven children and extended family living in the home. His family was interested in his schooling and open to communication. Ian appeared to have an introverted personality preferring to work alone yet was respectful and worked hard. I felt his initial data could also offer good information in both areas of this study.

Steve

Steve, a White 6-year-old male, was chosen due to his aggressive manners, poor peer interactions, little work ethic, and high academic level. His peer interactions were unpleasant and age-appropriate behaviors seemed absent. Steve's family fell in the middle-class range, parent involvement was very inconsistent, and often depended on which parent was available to come to school. His parents were often defensive when notified of disruptions, however once a

behavior plan was suggested by the counselor, they agreed to investigate outside help. Steve only worked hard if it was something he liked. He wanted to be the leader often and struggled working with female peers. I felt his data could offer good information in the social-emotional component of this study since he had a solid academic background.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred through a variety of methods to answer the posed research questions (see table 3.3). Data in this study was collected through 1) video recorded observations, 2) field notes, and 3) reflective journaling. Observations offered information to gain insight on behaviors, field notes helped describe data seen in those observations, and reflective journaling helped improve pedagogy. Measurements of outcomes from a variety of methods either validate or negate beliefs, which could lead to further research or alteration of the questions. Researchers need to make informed statements and by using different collection methods, results show integrity and support or refute findings.

Table 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Research Questions	Data Collection	Data Analysis
OQ: What happens when play-based learning strategies are implemented in a kindergarten classroom?	• Video recorded observations • Transcribed notes • Field notes • Past dissertations regarding play • Teacher discussions	• Review transcribed and field notes to look for patterns • Look for similarities in other dissertations • Use patterns to code during the primary coding phase • Start secondary code list
RQ1: What ways, if any, will using play-based learning assist with social-emotional	• Video recorded observations • Field notes • Articles regarding social-emotional skills	• Review transcribed and field notes to look for patterns • Use patterns to code during the primary coding phase

behavior development in kindergarten students?		• Start secondary code list • Look for similarities in other articles
RQ2: How does play-based learning impact literacy skills in kindergarten students?	• Video recorded observations • Transcribed notes • Field notes • Writing pieces from students	• Review transcribed and field notes to look for patterns • Use patterns to code during the primary coding phase • Start secondary code list • Analyze writing and use rubric for comparing

Video Recorded Observations

In using action research, I chose to record play session time to have the capability to watch sessions as many times as needed to code properly. I was also able to transcribe quotes from the participants as well as document behaviors and academic content knowledge. I would focus on one student at a time and once that was complete, I reviewed several more times to ensure there were no missing pieces. I also had records from observing child-led days when I was simply watching that helped solidify some behavior coding and gave direction on how to assist during teacher-directed days. Being able to observe the participants in a natural setting with few disruptions to their normal schedule allowed for genuine choices and authentic responses during play situations.

Field Notes

Being considered an insider-outsider researcher (IOR) was advantageous and I always kept a notebook with me during play sessions for writing down concrete details that documented behaviors and content knowledge. Conversations and interactions between students and adults

were logged with dates and times for accurate documentation. These qualitative notes were compared to the transcriptions from viewing recordings and used to complete data points. The evidence from the descriptive notes helped with the understanding of play-based learning implementation on behaviors in kindergarten students. Secondary analysis of these notes either proved or refuted my research questions.

Reflective Journal

With the timeline of this study, play stations were used twice a week, typically on Thursdays and Fridays. After school on play session days, I would reflect on what happened with students, how and if materials needed to be adjusted, and what role I needed for the next day to promote acceptable behaviors and appropriate knowledge absorption. Action research helped me theorize about the application of play-based learning and set practical goals for use in my classroom. In watching videos and reading field notes, I also became aware of how to adjust my own teaching; some things required more teacher guidance than others and adjustments were made in the level of academics that were presented. Goals were frequently adjusted depending on the actions and needs of the students. I have used reflective journaling my entire teaching career because it provides deeper thought processes and allows me to remember what worked during a lesson or what needed to be changed. Journaling helps with transparency and feelings are exposed, allowing for growth.

Data Analysis

To understand social-emotional behaviors of students in this study, I examined their actions during play and used questioning techniques to find out reasons for those actions. Above in table 3.3, descriptions of analysis were listed for procedural and organizational purposes of data evaluation. Students' behaviors and content knowledge were also noted and coded to look

for patterns in two cycles. Descriptions of themes were created during the initial coding process by the repetitive reviewing of field notes and transcribed notes from video recorded observations. Strategies used in this study included the planning of curriculum-related play, child-led and teacher-directed implementation of play-based learning stations twice a week for two hours, and video recorded observations where I either watched or participated.

Saldaña (2021) stated that, "Provisional coding begins with a 'start list' of researcher generated codes based on preparatory investigations that can be built upon or modified" (p. 368). Initial coding assisted with my organization of the findings and removed ambiguous summaries through a cyclical process. The first cycle coding categories I considered and borrowed from Saldaña (2021) to help me identify themes were provisional, descriptive, emotional, patterning, and In Vivo. Themes were generated into short phrases and used to identify documented data while looking for patterns. Some constructed themes included on/off task performances, successful/unsuccessful, cooperative/collaborative, empathetic behaviors, and self-awareness (see figure 3.3). Content knowledge labels of topics used were high, middle, or low level. Literacy themes that evolved were creativity and engagement. Table 3.4 describes the final coding categories used for the first cycle.

New discoveries and mapping codes a second time around exposed connections with frequency of behaviors and content mastery. The secondary cycle process allowed for more meaningful findings and relationships to develop. It also helped establish trustworthiness that guided me on how to organize and present the results. The secondary cycle coding presented subcodes that were: structural, pattern, theoretical, elaborative, longitudinal, and emotion. Table 3.5 describes the final coding categories used for the second cycle.

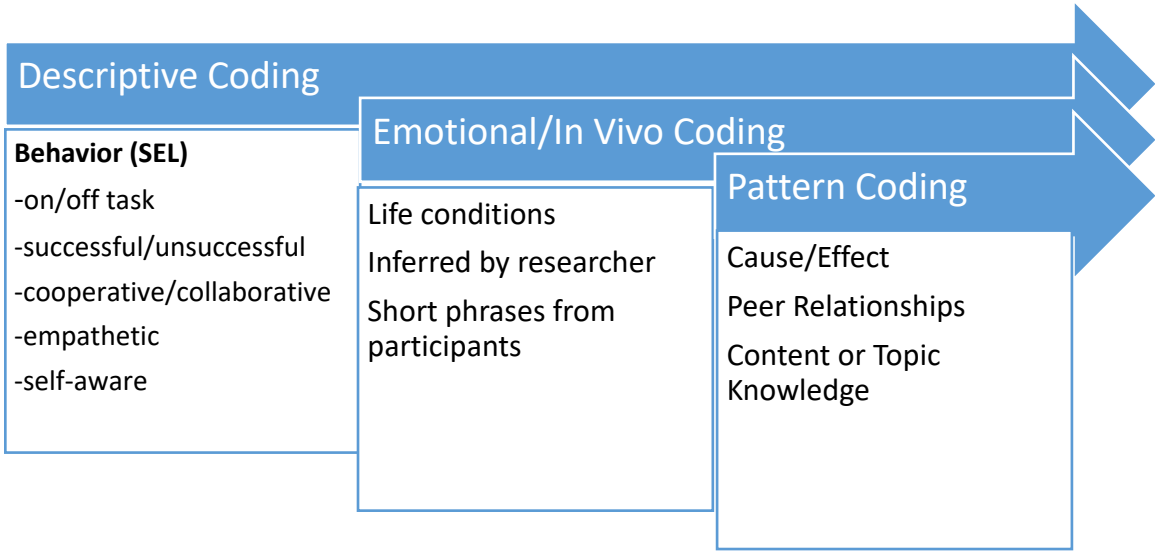

Figure 3.3. Descriptions of Codes

Transcriptions

In this study, qualitative features helped to examine and label behaviors in kindergarten students during play sessions. After viewing video recorded observations, transcriptions of short discussions that occurred during the play sessions and phrases students used during play helped with coding and patterning. Taking careful notes helped with accuracy of who was involved in the discussions and both verbal and nonverbal features were noted. No formal interviewing techniques were used due to the age of the students and multiple viewings of the recorded observations provide clarity offering trustworthy results.

Thematic Analysis Coding

Several cycles of the coding process took place to determine a path that best uncovered relationships between behaviors and academics. By systematically organizing qualitative data, coding allowed a cycle of discovery and transitions utilized during the data collection process revealed patterns. Coding data and finding common themes invited a starting point and allowed for the development of deeper codes to transpire (see table 3.4). Breaking down each video recorded observation session several times assisted with clarity of behaviors and needs.

Saldaña (2021) categorized coding labels, and those definitively applied in the first coding cycle included attribute, In Vivo, and provisional. Attribute coding explains participant characteristics and demographic features (age, gender, setting, ethnicity, and socio-economic status). In Vivo coding provides quotes from the participants and the researcher (i.e., indigenous terms may be found in this section). "In Vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participants' own language in the data record; it is used to prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 365). Provisional coding presented an exploratory start list used in the beginning of this study and was refined as this study progressed. "Key words or phrases can be codewoven to explore possible interrelationships related to the phenomenon" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 217).

Table 3.4. First Cycle Coding

Code Name	Outline of ideas	Details	How used
Attribute	-age -gender -setting -ethnicity -SES status	-specific to each individual or group	-Used for first cycle coding only -Coding 'grammar'
In Vivo	-specific terms from students -quotations	"too hard" "can't do it" "I don't know" "why do I have to" "not my favorite"	-Used for first cycle coding only to look for content understanding -Related to descriptive context analysis
Provisional	-start list -exploratory	Thematic analysis	-Used for first cycle coding only -themed ideas for behaviors and content

During play-based learning, I coded social-emotional behaviors as listed on the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE, n.d.) website under the Kansas Social, Emotional, and Character Development Model Standards (KSDE, 2018, -b), as well as stated from the CASEL

(2020) website such as: how students' social-emotional competencies practiced (social awareness and responsible decision making), how structured and unstructured activities affect behaviors (self-awareness and self-management), how using play-based learning strategies enhances learning (relationship skills). Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) requires that states find ways to meet at least one student success indicator along with other academic standards. "Federal- and state-level policies have important implications for the delivery of SEL instruction in the school setting, as they have the potential to promote SEL service delivery and educator accountability for ensuring social-emotional competence among students" (Eklund et al., 2018, p. 318).

Pattern Coding

Secondary coding and analyzing data showed students to be either successful or unsuccessful during the implementation of play-based strategies (see table 3.5). Behaviors were coded to determine if there were any patterns centered around on/off task, collaboration, taking turns, empathy, and self-awareness. Preliminary codes used were descriptive, emotional, structural, elaborative, longitudinal, pattern, and theoretical. In compiling results after revisiting videos, notes, and journaling, more trustworthy and credible findings were established. Final coding categories utilized were descriptive, emotion, structural, pattern, and theoretical.

Descriptive coding offered a summary and inventory of topics being studied by providing basic labels that may later evolve. "Descriptive coding assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase the basic topic of the qualitative data. It provides an inventory of topics for categorizing" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 362). Emotion coding identified emotions experienced by the participants and researcher during study. "Emotion coding labels emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant. It provides

insight on participants' perspectives or life conditions" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 364). Structural coding involved investigations of the content-based topics and standard protocols used in the classroom. Pattern coding helped condense notes, considered causes and effects, and laid a course for direction. "They pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful units" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322). Theoretical coding helped form more of a central idea explaining the advantages of play-based learning. "A theory states what, how, and why something happens. Many are provisional, condensed lessons we formulate from experiences to pass on" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 348).

Table 3.5. Secondary Cycle Codes

Code Name	Outline of ideas	Details	How used
Descriptive	-details, ideas -key words for future reference -basic, what you heard	*Subcoding *Pattern Coding *Context/Thematic Analysis *Frequency Counts	-Secondary relates to pattern and In Vivo – build on -Calculate frequency or % of responses -Successful or unsuccessful -Compare effects or impact on population
Emotion	-happy/sad -angry/fear -shame -making choices -taking risks	-prior experiences -age-appropriate actions -interpersonal actions of social relationships -decision making -verbal/nonverbal cues -Ethos -Triggers/Conflicts	-Secondary relates to descriptive and pattern; build on -Positive or negative effects -Subcodes if needed (i.e., anger results from embarrassment)
Structural	-content -standards -curriculum	-prior experiences -content analysis -age-appropriate actions	-Secondary – build on -Code charting
Elaborative	-metasummary or deeper analysis		Secondary
Longitudinal	-human development -constructing 'life'		Secondary

Pattern	-identify themes -cause/explain -human relationships -groundwork for cross-case analysis	*Context/Thematic Analysis *Behaviors – successful or unsuccessful	Secondary part of descriptive *see above notes*
Theoretical Coding	-umbrella (patterns and relationships between concepts)	-insight for improving social aspects	-Secondary -Focused coding = being socially acceptable and age expectations

Positionality

As a kindergarten teacher in a small, rural town with little diversity, I identify with the middle-class, White women, and United States citizens. Having worked hard and experienced traumatic events that could have led to other paths, I relate to those who are in a poverty situation which offers a sort of privilege because family upbringings are similar. As a doctoral student, I realize that some power (and privilege) lies in the fact that in receiving a higher education than most could lead to advantages of circumstance. In a small community the biggest weakness would most definitely be the lack of exposure to diverse cultures.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Action research is a cyclical process that yields interpretive results, which helped depict conclusions describing students' actions during play-based strategy implementation. Through collaboration with other teachers and by using a variety of data sources, I tried to build trustworthy data through triangulation. Outside perspectives through discussions with those teachers encouraged me to revisit plans and observing video footage multiple times facilitated relatable situations for coding purposes. Using the systematic process of action research and looking at curricular standards and standard-based mastery, the research was transferred to confirm findings in my classroom. I verified responses from video recorded observations during

the coding process to indicate stable, dependable data by watching multiple times. A common coding platform was developed to ensure consistent, uniform results with detailed notes discussed and clarified as necessary. Interpretations, information, and experiences learned from this research supported involving play-based learning strategy implementation and indicated relationships between behaviors and academics could possibly exist. Discussions with colleagues during the initial planning of this study offered triangulation by adding their perspectives into the stations. Weekly play-based planning sessions with colleagues occurred during this study and changes to topics were made as needed.

Conclusions deduced from the data were managed and collected in a confidential and ethical manner. Upon completion of this study, parents of the participants received a final report of the findings that occurred and a debriefing statement (see Appendix F). Other parents were given the debrief statement and if requested the documented findings were offered. Paper files and documents were stored in a locked cabinet while electronic data was secured on my computer that was password protected. Any notes taken during planning and/or observations, reflective thoughts or summarizations were coded for development and deliberation. A behavior list was created for coding that included themes of successful or unsuccessful in 1) empathy, 2) sharing, 3) self-awareness, and 4) collaboration. Similarly, an academic list was created for coding which included themes of engagement and creativity with a ranking of high, medium, or low knowledge level of vocabulary, job roles, and overall topic knowledge.

Credibility

As a participant in an action research project, I used qualitative results from video recorded observations, field notes, and reflective journaling to ensure credibility of the evidence gathered and adapted my pedagogy as needed. Transferability of this study to another

kindergarten classroom in another school could facilitate comparable responses. Adding play could allow for change in behaviors and academics to illustrate either a positive or negative response in the population. This study could also be completed over the course of a few years to deepen an understanding of play-based learning and the effects that occur. It could be continued in other grades to check dependability over time. The intentions of this study were to measure positive and/or negative changes in behaviors and academics.

As an outside researcher, patterns and general statements seemed more objective. The term insider-outside researcher (IOR) deems a difficult task because it varies with perspectives of self, values, and methods used (Nakata, 2015). Careful consideration of these points as both types of research were utilized has forced speculation at a deeper level. Nakata (2015) stated, "Outside researcher (OR) commonly refers to a situation in which an outsider, who knows little about the participants, collects, and critically examines the data as a third person" (p. 173). Looking critically at all the pieces of the research indicates a position as "a second-person research, collaborating with others in my community as well as a third-person inquiry of the wider community to include social benefits of the stakeholders" (Nakata, 2015, p. 170).

Unluer (2012) listed comparable problems regarding insider-outsider research with loss of objectivity, unconscious assumptions, and balance of role duality. Reviewing notes, there rarely appeared to be a conflict with generating 'real questions' since the answers appeared organic. Advantages led to having insider language, knowing the structure and values of the system in place, and convenience of time with using my class. Mercer (2007) stated, "Access is more easily granted to the insider researcher with no traveling involved and data is constantly available. Assumptions, however, may not be challenged and experiences may not be explained in depth" (p. 6).

Summary

Chapter three consisted of the research questions, research design, researcher role, site specifics, participant selection, data collection and analysis, positionality, trustworthiness, and credibility. Action research methodology and insider-outsider researcher (IOR) guidelines were outlined and used in this study. The site was a small school in the rural Midwest and participants included kindergarten aged students in one kindergarten classroom. Sources of data collection and analysis procedures were examined in detail including a list of themes and codes used for compiling information. Lastly, trustworthiness and credibility of this study were discussed.

Chapter four will discuss the results and findings which occurred from this action research using qualitative data points. Themes from the research questions evolved, were coded, and explained to outline each participant's results. Thematic units covered were also a discussion piece, adding to those results.

Chapter 4 - Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to review the impact of implementing play-based strategies in a kindergarten classroom and in what ways it influenced social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills in those students. Social-emotional behaviors are necessary for successful learning and through active involvement that is meaningful, collaboration and self-awareness may improve. With the reform of standards and rigorous curriculum, kindergarten has morphed from peer socialization into an academic situation. Theorists Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Jean Piaget (1966) believed that problem solving skills are largely environmental and accrue in developmentally appropriate stages. Play-based learning is a vehicle that allows children to explore emotions and better understand the surrounding world.

Play-based learning strategies can either be child-led or teacher-directed methods that use tools and critical thinking to solve real world problems. Child-led (unstructured) is self-chosen and follows ideas and reasonings specific to each individual child allowing time to explore alone or with peers. Teacher-directed (structured) is planned with an objective leading the organization of that activity. Play discovery helps maturation and developmentally appropriate practices aid cognitive engagement. Negotiation and communication skills are formed through play-based learning encouraging relationships to grow self-efficacy skills.

Action research was the chosen methodology used to allow me as the researcher to participate as needed. This study was looking for relationships in play, behavior, and literacy in a kindergarten setting. Purposefully planned thematic units that included play-based learning were used during this study to investigate social-emotional learning skills of taking turns/sharing, collaboration, self-awareness, and empathy. Units were created with the intent of increasing

literacy skills by engaging the use of thematic vocabulary word cards and examining writing pieces for creativity with details in storytelling using those vocabulary words. Both structured and unstructured play were utilized to examine prior knowledge of content of the participants. Structured play was modeled to meet objectives and unstructured play allowed free choice exploration of stations. While there may be some anxiety about using play-based learning strategies because there is not a specific curriculum, administrators and stakeholders could ask for teacher transparency when using play. These questions were addressed in this study:

Overarching Question: What happens when play-based learning strategies are implemented in a kindergarten classroom?

RQ1: What ways, if any, will using play-based learning assist with social-emotional behavior development in kindergarten students?

RQ2: How does play-based learning impact literacy skills in kindergarten students?

The findings in this study originated from field notes, reflective journaling, and recorded video observation transcriptions. Field notes were taken while the students were participating in play stations, and I was simply observing behaviors and interactions. After every scheduled play day, I reflected in a journal about the topics used, curriculum integration, and student actions that transpired during play. Video recorded observations were transcribed and used to refine or refute the field notes taken as well as add qualitative details to the results. This study investigated what happened when play was implemented into a kindergarten classroom, how social-emotional behaviors developed during play, and checked to see if literacy skills improved.

The contents of this chapter will describe those findings which included evolving themes and it will provide data analysis and descriptions (see figure 4.1). Categories were developed to sort evidence and codes were narrowed down through several rounds of the coding cycle.

Interpretations of the data may be perceived as subjective, however my intent was to be as respectful, transparent, descriptive, and unbiased as possible in communicating findings. Data was observational and derived from repetitive viewings of videos and reviewing narrative notes. Parents of the participants were given a debrief statement and were offered specific findings and details would be provided if requested (see Appendix F).

Always Adapting

As an enthusiastic educator, I am continually researching and trying new things in my class. This study allowed me to put some of those changes into action and alter them as needed. After changing my methodology to action research, I found out part of my role was to be a generator of knowledge. I enjoy researching new strategies or activities because it is just something I feel is part of my job description. As a teacher, I change my lesson plans immediately, gradually, and accordingly. Immediate changes happen when I see student struggles or when higher level thinking questions arise and need addressed. Gradual changes occur when I see either growth or decline in scores, or when a new curriculum is handed to me. Data drives me to be well-rounded in my practices by embracing the complex patterns involved with learning and the diverse student trends that happen every fall. This study was inspired by the reality my school setting presented.

In the beginning of the study, I purposefully started out as an observer. Looking through my reflective journal from child-led days, I noted student needs based on content knowledge and role confusion. Many students needed support with the idea of free choice play, which I understand because the routine and schedule school offers can create a secure feeling. By disrupting that feeling and allowing students to work without obstructions or rules, the uncertainty seemed to cause anxiety in some students. Other students embraced the freedom to

explore, some calmly others wild, during play. One student stated, “Why are you letting us do crazy things and be loud?” I noticed that the need for explanations on teacher-directed days the first few times helped clarify expectations and with time and gradual maturity, students were beginning to appreciate the freedom.

As the study progressed, I responded to the needs by changing my role to a participant which guided students in higher level thinking. Throughout the study, I noticed that several students responded well to the enriching discussions and in my journal saw notes regarding the need to find more material or use their ideas to incorporate student interest into the topics being used. I am open to changing my teaching style as needed for my students because trends in behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses continually fluctuates. This study has shown me the importance of play-based learning and I will continue to find ways to integrate the idea and find time for students to have this opportunity.

Teachers who may be interested in incorporating play can review standards and compare their science/social studies curricula to build stations. Gronlund and Rendon (2017) wrote an entire book on how to address standards in play, which I used after the stations were built to parallel thematic unit objectives. I started with setting up a timeline beginning with structured modeling to help clarify jobs, explain tools, and support questioning techniques. Then, I completed an oral interest inventory to determine knowledge levels and interests of students to explore what topics would possibly stimulate the most learning. Documentation of everything used would be beneficial to continue improving play-based learning strategies for future use and it would be beneficial to preserve work from students to grade growth in academics.

Research Question One

The first research question looked at how play-based learning assisted with social-emotional behavior development. Social-emotional behaviors focus on managing emotions and building relationships. Outside experiences, abilities, and having the capability to respond appropriately help build connections as children grow. Kindergarten students are basic learners requiring social skills for real life, transitioning, and academic learning. Themes that evolved while reviewing field notes and transcribed notes from recorded video observations were 1) empathy, 2) sharing, 3) self-awareness, and 4) collaboration as shown below in figure 4.1.

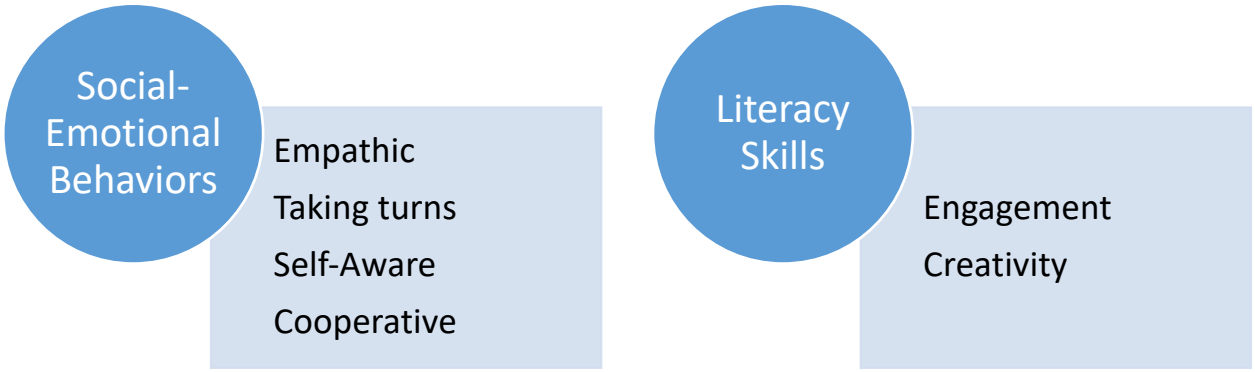

Figure 4.1. Coding Themes

Empathy is having the ability to understand others' feelings. Sharing involves taking turns and jointly using materials. Self-awareness deals with focusing on your own actions and taking care of your emotions. Collaboration centers around working as a team and communicating to complete a task. Field notes and transcribed notes from video recorded observations of the three focus students presented these themes and interpretation of the outcomes during play strategies appeared to influence the social-emotional behaviors of the participants. Descriptive coding

terms of ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ were used to determine if students were consistent or inconsistent with labeled social-emotional behaviors during play-based learning stations.

Theme One Empathy

Dealing with emotions can be challenging for young children because they may not understand or have the ability to imagine what another person may be feeling. Age plays a part in the development of empathetic actions due to the opportunity of experiences that comes with time. During this study, two types of empathy, cognitive and emotional, appeared while coding video recordings and field notes. Cognitive empathy deals with thinking about others’ perspectives and emotional empathy is having the ability to share feelings another person has. Compassionate behaviors regarding concern for others was one element the results suggested was missing. Dombkowski (2001) argued that ‘the maturation theory holds that kindergarten should retain its original aims of free play and personal and social development to reinforce the development of the ‘whole child’ through emotional and physical growth” (p. 534). The three focus students displayed underdeveloped empathy skills in both areas with minor improvement upon completion of this study.

Figure 4.2. Ice Cream Parlor/Fast Food Stations

Jill. Jill appeared to have unsuccessful empathetic behaviors overall, showing lack of control with attitude, facial expressions, and body language. While viewing the recordings and

reexamining field notes, there was only one documented time she was empathetic when a friend needed help. Concern for the student who was falling behind was evident in how her body language represented modeling and the act of helping at the play station. There were a few other times Jill appeared to like being a role model for that specific friend. She also seemed to pick up on when other struggling students needed help and slowly started to enjoy modeling behaviors from time to time (figure 4.2). Even though most of Jill's peers were often annoyed with her vociferous attitude and lack of compassion, her understanding of patience did improve slightly. With very few occurrences, her results indicated only minor improvement in cognitive and emotional empathy.

Ian. Ian appeared to have slightly successful empathetic behavior growth. In reviewing video recorded observation transcribed notes, Ian was cautious in his actions exhibiting characteristics of an introverted personality. Often during play, he would pull away from the group especially when disagreements were occurring. For the first half of this study, he had insufficient instances of empathetic behaviors due to little or no interactions with peers. Gradually over the course of this study, he began to be less reserved and in building trusting relationships, Ian began to understand the feelings of others. One specific instance from the video recordings led to a speculation about a vocabulary misunderstanding; he had apologized for hurting a peer's feelings, but the conversation ended with a resolution discussion between Ian and the peer. While there was evidence in field notes of some improvements in Ian's cognitive empathy by the end of this study, his overall results revealed there were no emotional empathy occurrences.

Steve. Steve appeared to have unsuccessful empathetic behaviors based on transcribed notes from video recorded observation and field notes. He repeatedly exhibited destructive and

impatient tendencies when others were making suggestions during play. Steve was extremely aggressive and avoided playing with female peers, which led to the need of a stricter environment during play and included an adult observing constantly. Being close minded to peers' ideas was a common theme found in transcribed notes from video recorded observations, believing his way was 'the best way.' During following peer directions stations, if the project outcome failed, he would reply with 'you are dumb' and 'if you would have listened to my idea,' which appeared to hurt his peers' feelings. Gradually over the course of this study, there were a few video recorded observations that showed he was starting to understand when an apology was necessary and progressively began taking responsibility for poor choices closer to the end of this study; however, no improvement was made for Steve in cognitive or emotional empathy.

Theme Two Sharing and Taking Turns

Sharing and taking turns are components of social-emotional growth that many children struggle with because boundaries are essential for protection. Children who take turns understand there is a wait time for an object that is wanted or needed for a project or playing with limits set by someone like a parent or teacher. Sharing objects can make children feel like they are losing control because they must give an object away that they like, and it may not be returned. Taking turns is usually easier because children know the object will be returned when the other person is done using it (figure 4.3). Both skills need to be practiced and taught with numerous repetitions for successful actions to transpire in real world situations. I was looking to see if these skills had begun before play was introduced, noting attendance in a preschool or daycare setting, and if skills were present, if improvement was needed. Over the course of this study, the three focus students' actions regarding sharing and taking turns showed a slight improvement based on findings from the data sources.

Figure 4.3. Community Helpers (Dentist, Army)

Jill. Findings from field observations and transcribed notes from video recorded observations of Jill indicated she acted differently if adults were watching. Jill was habitually not good at sharing or taking turns and needed constant reminders from adults in the room to think about her actions. Jill was adamant most of the time during play claiming 'I am in charge' and rarely voluntarily took turns. During both the dentist and vet station field notes, Jill repeatedly took toys from other students and when it was time for partner activities, would not allow her partner equal turns. Even though she was loud and portrayed disrespectful actions in the video recorded observations, she started to show she could take turns and share during the play unit on stores. Trends with sharing and taking turns behaviors for Jill were largely unsuccessful during child-led play group time, for she struggled to take turns with toys and/or job roles; however, during the teacher-directed group time trends showed improvement with adult supervision. Minimal gains were made for Jill in the sharing piece of this study.

Ian. In the first two weeks of this study, field notes suggested Ian did not display trouble with sharing or taking turns because he would choose items not being used and find a place to play alone. Lack of interactions seen in video recorded observations led to adult modeling for

him with peers of his choice to see if he needed help with the materials or help communicating. The next four weeks of field notes and video recorded observations showed he made growth with taking turns and sharing materials when instructed to do so; however, it was still his preference to play alone. One incident during the video recorded observations showed he was playing with his group and a peer took something he was playing with, so he just picked up something else and continued playing instead of reacting like a typical kindergartener. He rarely seemed upset, nor did he reacted with yelling or tattling, he simply would look momentarily defeated then move to the next toy. Factors that may have influenced Ian's data included culture and family. Conclusions from Ian's video recorded observations and field notes implied he had the capabilities to share and take turns. Ian was nonconfrontational and simply content with the idea of playing whether alone or with peers and had few transcriptions through the first half of the study.

Steve. Steve had a poor disposition for the first half of this study and his aggressive nature seen in the video recorded observations turned his peers away from wanting to play with him. When Steve did not want to do a station, he was disruptive and showed very severe behaviors during all the play stations and referred to them as 'stupid.' Field notes from the dentist station indicated he was annoyed, so he broke the tweezers waiting his turn, and was angry when he had to take turns with the molded teeth. At the doctor station he pouted when he was not allowed to be the doctor, and at the vet station he had the animals attacking each other. Steve tended to play aggressively at all the play stations, argued about sharing, and was very loud, which caused some of his team to want to move to another station. He did not share well and was pushy, wanting to always be the leader and not the helper.

Throughout this study, Steve struggled with child-led stations because he refused to share and take turns with materials as well as acted inappropriately with materials stating, ‘you don’t know how, let me do it’. However, while participating in the teacher stations, he listened to ideas presented and took turns with tools and jobs. Steve was great with the patterning partner activity and enjoyed putting a puzzle together with male peers; but results showed he was still unsuccessful with sharing and taking turns. Overall findings from video recorded observations and field notes showed that Steve did not share, was pushy, and always wanted to be the leader and not the helper.

Theme Three Self-Awareness

Having the ability to monitor feelings, thoughts, and actions demonstrates self-awareness in the emotional regulation realm. Children can gain an understanding of self by learning to trust others, monitor personal strengths and weaknesses, and consider how values and opinions differ during play-based learning. Building problem solving and thinking skills that are intentional and perceiving why one may feel a certain way enables a deeper level of consideration (figure 4.4). Making choices that make others happy is challenging for all ages, especially kindergarteners. In this study regarding play-based learning strategies, this characteristic appeared difficult to develop for the three focus students. While findings did show improvement for all, the short time frame of this study most likely did not allow for sizable growth.

Figure 4.4. Building Stations

Jill. Jill struggled with trusting others and rarely valued the opinions of her peers. Transcribed notes from video recorded observations show that she stated many times that ‘they won’t listen to me,’ ‘I am the boss,’ or ‘they never let me have a turn,’ leading to unsuccessful self-awareness behaviors during child-led play strategies. During video recorded observations, Jill displayed many peculiar mannerisms in her conversations and actions that were not developmentally age appropriate. For example, there were numerous occasions with her using baby talk when she did not get her way and shouting at peers bothered them enough that they refused to play at stations she was at. Jill broke some of the baking toys from playing too roughly which upset her team, and this led to her wanting to play alone instead of with the group. Field notes indicated Jill’s communication slowly improved; however, frequent pouting and removing herself from stations to sit at her desk became solutions when her peers would share their opinions and she disagreed.

Even though Jill was off task more than she was on task during play, transcribed notes from video recorded observations and field notes showed progress with self-awareness about 50% of the time because she began to understand her strengths and weaknesses. Jill’s life conditions as well as various responses from transcribed notes of video recorded observations led

to suggestions that show she has little work ethic and does not take responsibility for her actions, acting clueless when she does wrong. Inappropriate language and behaviors may also stem from her homelife and the fact that she is one year older than her peers.

Ian. Ian's findings from field notes showed he was extremely self-aware in his strengths and weaknesses and gradually began to understand the importance of the opinions of his peers. His knowledge of certain topics and confidence in abilities during child-led play were apparent in the video recorded observations. However, when he was unsure of materials or topics, Ian often scratched his head, wrinkled his nose, and would say, 'uh, I'm not really sure' or 'are you kidding me?' trying to make a joke of it. This type of feeling, thinking, and doing are key points in self-awareness. Teacher-directed strategy days for Ian indicated an absence of confidence throughout the entire study shown in the field notes; there were many things he knew but was fearful of sharing because he did not want to be wrong. Once he knew his ideas were correct, he always got a big smile and would express relief. Life conditions with a language barrier may have hindered him to start with, but it was evident from the findings Ian made progress in self-awareness overall.

Steve. Steve's findings from transcribed notes of video recorded observations began with intimidating behaviors overall, needing constant reminders to be respectful, take pride in his work, and play carefully. He would demand that he was in charge, did not have to listen, and continued to use a loud voice and aggressive behaviors, causing his peers to leave the station. Steve's disrespectful actions and destructive nature led to removal for a few minutes to reset behaviors during every play station for the first six weeks. Female peers steered clear of stations he was at because several occasions showed Steve making impolite comments to them. Field notes also indicated that when Steve did not want to do a station, he was disruptive, but when he

was good at something or enjoyed it, his behavior was more on task. Many times, during the following peer directions stations, he would reply with ‘you are dumb’ and ‘if you would have listened to my idea’ if the project outcome failed. Being close-minded to peers’ ideas was a common theme, believing his way was ‘the best way.’

Steve appeared to have a poor attitude for the first half of this study and was careless in his work according to video recorded observations. He raced to be the first one done and until the last play unit on polar animals, struggled valuing opinions of his peers. In the middle of this study, field notes indicated Steve was starting to use less aggressive behaviors and had fewer incidents that required removal from the stations. There were a few times he even assisted when someone in his group was unsure of what to do. After many discussions with parents and the school counselor, his patience improved, and he started focusing on his strengths and weaknesses. Steve’s findings suggested self-awareness did improve closer to the end resulting in average growth.

Theme Four Collaboration

People work together every day in a variety of settings to complete projects and communicate ideas. This skill is fundamental in understanding how all members of a team are important and should contribute to an assignment. Problem solving skills are strengthened during collaboration because other ideas offered connect different types of learning with innovative plans. Communication within a team builds a bridge for speaking and listening. During this study, child-led and teacher-directed strategy days were planned to watch for the development of cooperative behaviors. From the results of the focus students in this study, field notes and video recorded observation notes indicated the biggest gains occurred in collaboration.

Jill. In general, Jill did not work well on child-led strategy days and collaboration continued to be a battle throughout most of this study. Both were a struggle because many of her peers became irritated with her intense behaviors and avoided stations where she was playing. Constant direction about her voice level and reminders of teamwork were recorded throughout the entire study and seen in video recorded observations. Teacher-directed days showed acceptable collaborative behaviors and with that adult supervision, she acted more respectfully with prompts. Field notes suggested that she appeared to be more cooperative when given constant reminders. There were two incidents from video recorded observations during the different stores unit where data showed she collaborated appropriately and had less disruptive tendencies.

When store job roles were assigned by the teacher, Jill was hesitant if it was a job she did not want to do, but she always chose to participate rather than observe. During child-led days when students voluntarily took role turns, often this led to an unwilling attitude to contribute. During the final unit on different stores, field notes suggested that Jill was beginning to show improvement in collaboration and appeared willing to play. Her communication did improve during collaborative activities and gradually she took direction from peers better. Even though there was improvement towards the end of this study, Jill continued to struggle with collaboration overall and her disrespectful attitude set limitations for peer interactions.

Ian. Video recorded observations in the beginning of this study suggested Ian had characteristics which included lack of confidence, being quite reserved, and being extremely conscious of his abilities, or lack of. There were times from field notes that his age and language proved to disrupt his thinking; however, he gradually began to accept help from peers when he needed it for vocabulary or definitions and learned it was acceptable to ask questions. Child-led

strategy days indicated some withdrawal from peers because field notes suggested that he preferred to work alone in isolated areas, reporting he did not like the loud talking and disagreements among friends. On teacher-directed days, he would voluntarily take turns with toys and/or job roles when instructed to and he listened to friends' ideas and followed peer directions when given.

Ian regularly portrayed cooperative and respectful behaviors to his peers and was willing to help any time. Frequently, the statement 'I love play days' was recorded in documentation from field notes. In the middle of this study, transcribed notes from video recorded observations indicated that Ian started to branch out and invite peers to build with him or he would choose a station where peers were at instead of working alone. He started to become good friends with many students, grew comfortable discussing, and his communication and leadership skills evolved (i.e., asked his team to help him fix the broken table). Ian was also aware when it was time to remove himself from a situation due to uncooperative peers. There was never an argument, he would just leave the station. He began to understand the importance of times he should work in a group and not alone. Although his personality remained cautious, collaborative growth was noticeable for him; he was excited to participate with peers and began asking more inquisitive questions. Ian's results indicated a significant increase of collaborative behaviors from the beginning to the end of this study.

Steve. In the beginning of this study, Steve's behavior tendencies were extremely unsuccessful in collaborative work, struggling to work in any fashion with a team or peers. Steve was consistently aggressive and disruptive during child-led strategy days but results from video recorded observations showed he enjoyed the play stations overall. Patterns that appeared in field notes suggested he preferred to work alone, and his aggressive behaviors indicated a stricter

environment with either adult or peer modeling was needed to be successful. Teacher-directed strategy days benefited Steve because there was an adult constantly reminding him of how to behave during group work. Since he preferred to be in charge and his voice was regularly loud, his collaboration skills needed substantial direction from adults during teacher-directed days. Field notes revealed that Steve missed out on several hours of play due to not allowing others to participate in a station and several violent episodes of throwing and breaking toys. Intervention time with the school counselor and parent meetings were scheduled to assist with his outbursts.

Steve started to understand his aggressive behaviors frightened his peers. Collaborative projects often led to a breakdown at the beginning of this study if his team did not finish first, but gradually toward the end of this study Steve began to grasp the idea of losing gracefully. During the stores unit, there was one notable occurrence detected from the video recorded observations: Steve was showing remorse after being too aggressive when playing, upsetting a peer. He apologized and participated better towards the end of this study. While issues still occurred throughout the duration of this study, field notes indicated that there was a slight improvement in his collaborative work. Steve learned that he wanted to be able to participate in play rather than miss out, so he began making responsible choices to support his peers.

Research Question Two

This question became an examination of ways play-based learning impacted literacy skills. Content knowledge of thematic units which included community helpers, stores, and a polar unit brought forth themes of engagement and creativity as listed in figure 4.1 during the coding process. In the beginning of the study, I was looking to see if students would engage with new words by using the vocabulary/picture cards set up on the themed word wall for the writing station until they had enough phonetic skills to implement what I call ‘smartie spelling’ (smartie

spelling involves using letters and sounds to build words). As time went on, I decided to add the creative concept of storytelling through the introduction of these vocabulary words. I began looking for an increase in details when students were writing and using said vocabulary words (see Appendix A).

Play encourages engagement of students with each other, using the materials involved, and trying new things. For kindergarten students, the world around them involves discovery of new environments and situations, so setting aside play time encompasses that engaging feel of learning. Creativity themes stemmed from students using ideas learned from peers for solving problems, experimenting with new tools, or repeating investigations due to failure. Each child brought unique experience sets to share which allowed others to generate alternative thoughts from those outside perspectives. Exploration of materials during play offered imagination expansion by using prior experiences and new knowledge to create original ideas.

Theme One Engagement

Doing, trying, and taking part in activities are ways children explore and experiment with peers to learn about things. “It is believed that children learn best through self-directed, active exploration with materials and interaction with other children and adults” (Lee et al., 2006, p. 166). Interacting builds commitments with others and encourages goal setting. Play-based learning in a classroom offers flexibility of choice, allows decisions to be made by children, and guides learning through exploration. When children are invested and excited, motivation can lead to responsible behavior formation. In this study, field notes indicated the focus students’ growth in engagement was significant. Subject, or content, knowledge at the kindergarten level can be high or low largely depending on how much exposure there is. Content knowledge refers to the concepts of the principal idea being taught (i.e., did a student know how to properly use a

hammer). Exposure to a wide variety of topics fosters easy learning for some, yet others' life situations may hinder it.

Jill. Field notes suggested that Jill indicated off task behaviors on child-led strategy days when she had little content knowledge of the topic at the assigned play station. This brought frustration out of her, and numerous times uncooperative behaviors were documented in field notes. She became stubborn when she did know about the topic and peers would not listen to her invented ideas. Video recorded observations suggested Jill was uninterested in the dentist station, claiming she had not been to the dentist, but enjoyed the doctor and vet stations with a higher knowledge base. Field notes recorded behaviors of her being pushy and whiny when she did not want to participate, which ultimately stemmed from a lack of understanding the topic. It appeared that her lack of prior knowledge, even with being a year older than her peers, bothered her.

Content knowledge for Jill was average for the dentist and vet play-based topics seen in the video recorded observations. During both stations, video recorded observations presented times which showed Jill taking toys from other students so she could pretend to know what they were, bragging profusely. When others would comment about her mistakes, Jill became offended and would pout. Video recordings during the fire station, police, army, and construction play suggested Jill appeared to have a higher level of knowledge regarding these topics but continued to struggle with being engaged for the entire play period. She was vocal when she did not want to participate in a station or when she was finished, often interrupting others during play to meet her needs. Jill enjoyed when a friend needed her help and from field notes, she appeared excited to teach.

Attendance was an issue for Jill and the days she was at school, video recorded observation transcriptions showed she was not very knowledgeable with most of the vocabulary used in the play stations. Her attention span when she was unsure of the topic led to trying to leave assigned stations frequently. During stores which included a bakery, an ice cream parlor, a pizza place, a donut shop, a fast-food restaurant, and a grocery store, Jill had a high knowledge level of all topics' content. She was happy to participate in all of these, however her forceful personality often turned peers away. By the end of this study, findings showed Jill's knowledge level on the content used to be average overall.

Ian. Video recorded observations and field notes indicated Ian was frequently a quiet investigator over the course of this study, yet always delighted when the play days happened. He began this study as an observer more than a participant, but by the end of this study, he started to engage more frequently offering knowledge of his own. Ian's behavior on child-led strategy days indicated on-task behaviors, however he was more reserved when he had a lack of content knowledge or was unsure how to use items at the station. On teacher-directed strategy days, Ian was more confident when listening to the teacher explain tools and vocabulary. Field notes showed he preferred to observe his peers first and then explore after. Hesitation was noted frequently, occurring 75% of the time for the first half of this study, and gradually began to lessen over time to 20% by the end.

In the video recorded observations, Ian appeared to enjoy playing at the doctor, dentist and vet stations but seemed more reserved at the vet station due to lack of exposure. He relied heavily on his peers for content knowledge, observing others before taking tools to the side to work alone, claiming he did not have a pet at home. Content knowledge for the doctor and dentist were average, showing Ian knew the terminology and how to use the tools. However, if

something was not his favorite, results showed that he would often observe and not participate consistently. At the fire station, police, army, and construction play areas, field notes showed he had a higher level of knowledge on these topics and was confident with using the terminology and supplies provided (i.e., told the team the jump rope could be used as a hose to put out the house fire). Construction was noted as his favorite and evidence from asking questions showed he really enjoyed the outside presenter's engaging activities.

Numerous times were documented that he replied with 'building stuff is my favorite thing to do' and he often had a hard time ending those stations. Ian's structures were solidly built, and he communicated well during the partner activity. Findings from the play unit on various stores showed indications of higher content knowledge, but again a lack of interest led to disengaging behaviors. In the beginning of this study, sharing ideas or answers openly for Ian was a struggle. When prompted, he would reply after a peer had done so. However, there was growth charted in field notes by the end. Content knowledge for Ian overall with these topics was average and results during play-based learning appeared to increase his willingness to explore even when he did not know about the topic.

Steve. Steve wanted to be able to share his knowledge and experience regarding the content. With a high content knowledge and exposure to terminology of all topics used, Steve would have been a good role model if his behaviors would not have deterred building relationships with peers. In video recorded observations, he claimed several times to prefer to work with boys or his friends rather than girls. For the first half of this study, Steve constantly disagreed with the 'leader' of the station, demanding it was his turn to be in charge. Initial field notes during child-led strategy days showed Steve to have very aggressive behaviors during all the play stations, referring to them as 'stupid.' The dentist and doctor stations annoyed him, so

he pouted upon receiving removal from the stations until he was respectful of the materials. During the vet station, he was not chosen to be the veterinarian first, so he sat in the waiting room and made his stuffed dog fight with other dogs. During the fire station, police, army, and construction stations, it was obvious Steve had a high knowledge level on these topics as well and teamwork continued to be troublesome. He preferred to build and work alone, verbalizing his irritations with peers, setting the stage for disaster. Steve was happy to be chosen as the construction helper during the presentation; however, he had trouble allowing others to use the tools, stating he was the smartest and needed to build. Partner listening and following directions stations were mentioned in field notes as challenging at the beginning of this study, but towards the end outcomes began changing for Steve in a positive way.

Field notes suggested that while participating in the teacher stations, Steve listened to ideas presented and took turns with tools and jobs. When given direction from adults, he began stations with acceptable actions but dependent on who he was working with, certain peers influenced a change in behaviors. After the first two weeks, his groups were modified to observe actions with peers who held similar levels with content knowledge and female peers were not included until later. Slowly over time, females and other peers were introduced into his groups with the support of an adult to monitor actions. Slight growth was made by the end of this study regarding child-led days and random peer groupings. Gradually, Steve became calmer and participated better with all peers, allowing less adult supervision.

Theme Two Creativity

Kindergarten students can have a vivid imagination or one that needs to be shaped, largely dependent on experiences they have encountered. Problems arise daily, in various situations, and require a thought process to occur forming connections to solutions. Being

creative in forming solutions brings originality to a project and shows divergent thinking. Open-ended questions force lengthy answers and encourage free thinking to transpire. Developing creative ideas that are different from conventional ideas improves problem solving. Plucker and Beghetto's working definition of creativity (as cited in Leggett, 2017) stated, "Creativity is the interplay between the ability and process by which an individual or group produces an outcome or product that is both novel and useful as defined within some social context" (p. 846).

Play-based learning allows children to openly discuss topics with their peers before consulting with an adult. When learning to read, children should be able to talk about pictures in the book with lots of detail. Over the course of this study, the focus students' thought processes and creative ideas increased with time and exposure to topics. There were times that lack of content knowledge obstructed more profound thinking in some cases; however, by the end of this study with the play-based learning exposure and peer interaction, the creative responses made significant growth.

Jill. Jill showed creativity at random times throughout this study. It was not evident in field notes that her creative growth was consistent, but over the duration of this study it appeared more profound. She was always willing to offer suggestions, but the results showed unintentional design overall. Results were recorded as creative if students made suggestions that were not on the lesson plan. Seen in a video recorded observation during the doctor, dentist, and vet stations, Jill's creative idea was to ask her peers about setting up a waiting area and this idea sparked others' excitement. When the topics were fire station, police, army, and construction, Jill had no creative thoughts to offer and chose to sit out of the writing and art station. At a point in this study about six weeks in, students were tasked with using phonetic skills which were taught during reading to use while in writing stations. With the unit on stores, field notes indicated she

understood how to take orders from customers and make lists; however, when writing the lists and orders, she preferred to use the word wall cards instead of sounding out words as instructed. Jill also wanted to make up her own recipes when making pizzas or donuts and not follow the direction cards from her customers. Overall results with creativity regarding writing showed a poor effort regarding academics was common.

Ian. For Ian, sharing ideas or answers openly was a struggle, but even with little knowledge of the topics his results indicated on-task behaviors. On child-led strategy days, field notes showed he was more reserved when he was missing content knowledge or when he was unsure of how to use items at the station. Ian began this study less courageous and results heavily showed he was leery of making mistakes and would wait to complete a task or use something until he saw how a peer reacted. When prompted in video recorded observations, he would reply only after a peer had done so; however, once Ian knew his ideas were correct, he always got a big smile and would express relief.

During the doctor, dentist, and vet stations, video recorded observations indicated Ian continued to mimic peers' answers if he did not know. It was not apparent until the fire station, police, army, and construction station that he was ready to make suggestions or model tool usage. These topics were his favorite and he happily tried writing and designing during this unit. Ian was willing to try and sound out words as well as offer suggestions to peers. When it came to the unit of different stores, Ian had an average knowledge level about these topics and was happy to have play time. Findings suggest that he knew the various job roles of the store workers but some of the terms and vocabulary were challenging (i.e., called pizza toppings 'ornaments' because he 'knew they made the pizza look nicer'). Ian followed directions on recipe cards well

alone and with partners, took turns with materials, and showed collaborative interaction during the writing and art stations.

By the end of this study, he was talking and interacting more with peers, and results showed his creativity in general was not as strong. Very few original ideas came from him and repeatedly he would try to avoid the writing station, but he was compliant and followed directions throughout this study. Results for Ian regarding creativity may have been skewed due to avoidance in some cases and weaknesses in fine motor skills deterred him from wanting to write as well.

Steve. Findings in video recorded observations and field notes suggested Steve had the capability for great potential regarding imagination and showed creativity in problem-solving skills in many of the topics; however, his work ethic prevented genuine results. In reviewing field notes on child-led days, Steve's behavior at the beginning of this study was problematic, off task, and his aggressive behaviors led to missing parts of several of the play days. His results regarding creativity were very sporadic until the middle of this study when he had time to work with our counselor and started to recognize consequences. During the doctor, dentist, and vet stations which were first in this study, video recorded observations show Steve acted out and when he was at the writing and art station, any work he had was poor in quality.

When the fire station, police, army, and construction stations were being utilized, Steve's behavior had improved, and he was excited to play. His work in the writing and art stations was original and Steve was one of the few students to follow directions using sounds and not the word wall cards. During the unit on different stores, field notes indicate he had creative thoughts to add to the group (i.e., asked if they could make breadsticks with extra felt and foam) and evidence began to show improvement in his creative thinking. Once he began interacting with

his peers more appropriately, Steve was helpful when they were unsure of tools or terminology. By the end of this study, field notes showed lack of interest and poor effort declined.

Overarching Question

The desired outcome of this study was to see what would happen when I included play in the classroom schedule and with the inclusion of core curricular topics. Throughout this study, results uncovered that the three proposed research questions shared commonalities in the details being studied. I found basic aspects from this study provided direction toward combining the questions into one overarching question that transformed into what happens behaviorally and academically when play-based learning is implemented in a kindergarten classroom. In reviewing results, a variety of themes emerged which I coded to established qualitative findings. Students observed in this study were affected in some fashion from implementing play-based learning strategies. Current academic practices have rigorous processes and standards in which kindergarten students are expected to master. According to the results derived in this study, play-based learning supports both the cognitive and social aspects of education.

Social-emotional behaviors and academic skills were both somewhat affected by the introduction of purposeful play-based learning strategies. Positive and negative effects occurred in social-emotional behaviors and modeling was needed for successful implementation of some play-based stations. Skills observed in this study dealt with emotions during play and themes of taking turns, collaboration, self-awareness, and empathy were coded most frequently. Purposeful planning and necessary curricular changes occurred throughout this action research study as needed. Recorded observations of students were surveyed several times with notes of prior experiences, or lack of, to help determine what modeling took place during play stations (figure

4.5). Both social-emotional and academic skill coding showed minor inclines over the course of the 18-week study in three focus students.

The results stemmed from how play-based learning assisted with social-emotional and literacy development in kindergarten. Social-emotional themes of empathy, sharing, self-awareness, and collaboration surfaced in all the focus students' data. In reviewing observational notes from video recordings and field notes during the child-led strategy days, I noticed that the first five weeks of this study showed challenging behaviors that gradually improved over time. Child-led strategy days progressed into more cooperative and collaborative group work with fewer off task behaviors taking place as concrete expectations evolved. Teacher-directed strategy days were more productive because specific instructions were delivered by an adult, and explanations provided ideas for students to consider. Teacher-directed strategy days started to allow for deeper discussions, and I was able to be more of a participant observer, prompting fewer students than in the beginning.

Figure 4.5. Outside Visitors

Valuable correlations between play-based learning and social-emotional behaviors arose. Findings from field notes showed both strategies were enjoyed by all students because free play

during child-led days allotted time for developmentally appropriate discussions to take place and teacher-directed days improved critical thinking breaks from regular academic routines with adult support. Field notes and video observations showed communication was a struggle at the beginning of this study because many students were unsure of how to ask questions, share needs or ideas, and some were confused about jobs, tools, or vocabulary outlined in the play stations. For the first half of this study, I took time to reflect in my journal about how communication was important for age-appropriate discussions to occur during child-led stations and how asking questions can be modeled. Discussing how to handle feelings and emotions correctly was addressed as well. By including all students in small group conversations during teacher-directed days, I could look for triggering behavior patterns due to lack of specific or general play station knowledge.

Through viewing video recordings and observational notes, both forms of play-based learning proved to assist with behaviors and academics overall. The child-led strategy days then provided direction for instruction on teacher-directed days. During teacher-directed play, students listened and learned about items, then took turns playing with tools and doing all jobs. As the teacher, my involvement in these stations began as an adult participant, assisting with questioning techniques and probing thoughts. Eventually I started asking questions about why actions were taking place to see what planning was happening from the students to gather content knowledge.

With no directions given besides ‘be safe’ and ‘use an inside voice,’ findings indicated that students better understood what to do as time progressed. At first, they were not sure how to act, problem solving skills and critical thinking were absent, and many arguments led to disengagement or behavior problems. Child-led play was used to entice outside thinking and peer

modeling to figure out problems. Unstructured play time allowed students to make free choices and experiment with each other within safe perimeters. Based on findings, child-led strategies appeared beneficial for most of the students and I was able to start examining field notes and video observation transcriptions on background knowledge.

In reviewing all data sources, themes of engagement and creativity emerged while looking at ways play-based learning impacted literacy skills. The lack of exposure of the topics used indicated teacher-directed days were beneficial, particularly in the beginning. Play-based learning did show increased topic knowledge for the focus students in job role participation, correct tool usage, and vocabulary. It was apparent one of the students who attended preschool had a good background in most of the units used, and the other two had more limited backgrounds. Overall structural coding results (see table 3.5) regarding topic content of play stations indicated that students enjoyed the freedom during child-led play but needed adult supervision to prompt behaviors, encouraging students to try each job role. Teacher-directed play went well as there was an adult there to answer questions or make suggestions helping steer broader exploration. Literacy growth can be seen throughout this study through active engagement and imaginative problem solving.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the results and presented several themes in behaviors and academic learning. Thematic units composed of community helpers, stores, and a polar unit were the focus of this 18-week study. The timeline scheduled days for both child-led and teacher-directed play-based learning opportunities to ask peers questions, increased topic knowledge and encourage creative thinking. Findings revealed students often had a hard time deciding where to play, who to play with, and in some cases were unsure of what to do on child-led days at the

beginning of this study; however, toward the middle of this study, results indicated with some adult guidance that students felt more comfortable freely exploring the play stations. Both positive and negative effects occurred in behaviors and literacy skill development.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Summary of Findings

In general, the findings from this study suggested play-based learning helped the participants with both social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills. Field, reflective journaling, and observational notes helped me to organize findings into themes and consider implications of my study for future research. Social-emotional behaviors in students are becoming more apparent in classrooms and teachers struggle with how to address them and meet curricular goals. Struggles in literacy could be happening due to the increase of expectations listed in the standards and rigorous curricula used in classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore if implementing play-based learning strategies would alter behaviors and improve literacy skills. Developmentally appropriate topics were incorporated into play stations over an 18-week period in a kindergarten classroom to observe students. Purposefully planned play stations were created to allow for either child-led or teacher-directed strategies to promote collaboration.

Qualitative findings discovered during the interpretation of data helped me contemplate adaptations needed in my classroom and in early childhood education in general. Since action research was used, I could participate as an insider-outsider researcher and with that freedom I could alter my teaching strategies of play topics according to background knowledge I documented from students during child-led days. The research questions transformed and an overarching question of what happened when play-based learning strategies were implemented in a kindergarten classroom led this study. Two aspects of that question developed into more specific ideas which were 1) how does play-based learning assist with social-emotional behavior development in kindergarten students and 2) how does play-based learning impact literacy skills in kindergarten students. This chapter will discuss conclusions constructed from the data sources,

interpretations of the findings from the research questions, and offer recommendations for future research.

Overarching Question

A central question of what happened when play-based learning strategies were implemented in a kindergarten classroom led this study. As a teacher, I am always looking for ways to help my students learn. In implementing the diverse teaching strategy of play-based learning, my students were given meaningful opportunities to learn through purposeful play. Play allowed my students to freely and safely explore planned topics to make connections between the real world and tools used in stations. By completing this study, I found that by incorporating play into my classroom my students were excited to have time to engage with peers. They learned from each other and grew in problem solving and communication skills at an age-appropriate level. Students learned how it felt to share and ask for help from peers and adults if they needed to. I saw improvement in my students' self-esteem, language, listening, collaboration, and creativity. Persistence was one area in which students struggled but play led them to understanding difficulties made them stronger.

Certainly, age plays a part and guidance may be needed to begin play stations especially if prior knowledge of topics being used is missing. When things were difficult, adults were there to answer questions if peers could not, and adults asked questions to promote higher level thinking. Play through experimenting with guidance as needed built confidence in my students. The effects on the brain, as stated by Gronlund and Rendon (2017), show that active play stimulates neural growth in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for personality and decision making, and the amygdala, which is responsible for processing memory and emotions (p.14).

Children are naturally curious and building on children's interests created an excitement for learning. Mraz et al. (2016) recommended "early in the year, do a close and careful study of your students' likes and dislikes" (p.110). Through observations and conversations, Mraz et al. (2016) stated that "these records are invaluable in helping to understand the whole child and personal connections with each child builds a strong relationship" (pp. 112-113). Properly planned and purposeful play offered opportunities for my students to collaborate and self-explore with same-aged peers in an educational setting. The disguise of academics in play-based learning stations reinforced literacy skills without interruptions in cooperative learning. My students enjoyed the scheduled play days and upon completion of this study, I revamped my lessons to allow for this to occur the remainder of the school year.

RQ1

The next research question of how play-based learning assisted with social-emotional behavior development in kindergarten students exposed more specific findings. Development of social-emotional behaviors begins at home and as time progresses, peer communities at daycare and school help establish the construction of deeper empathetic and collaborative behaviors. The growth of social-emotional behaviors transpires from a combination of people and values that children are exposed to. "Developmentally constitutive relations with adults along with supportive environments are foundations to healthy development" (Osher et al., 2020, p. 8). Children need to be put in situations where they have chances to make choices and learn from them. Play-based learning strategies offered my students those options and presented situations for them to practice with.

Play-based learning may have been referred to as theme-based learning in the past, however the idea behind it remains the same. Almon and Miller (2011) stated, "Rather than

standards, well-prepared early educators need appropriate guidelines they can apply with flexibility" (p. 3). Planning a program or units on topics that include different learning styles, such as auditory or kinesthetic, presents the intent for natural exploration and socialization to happen. Play involves social interactions with peers and collaboration, yet with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing schools into fully virtual learning environments, children are missing some of the behaviors needed for communication due to lack of playing. Osher et al., (2020) stated, "Early and ongoing developmental relationships at home and at school promote balance between self-regulatory systems and contribute to the child's capacity to regulate emotions, behavior, and cognition" (p. 8).

Play encourages both positive and negative social experiences with peers that allow discoveries to shape personalities and behaviors. My students looked forward to play days and were curious as to 'what was next' in our scheduled play weeks. I saw my shy students let their guards down and engage with peers, and all students made new friends. They learned to communicate feelings and were beginning to understand patience. At recess, more unity and problem solving occurred when circumstances were presented. One day, only three balls were inflated enough for basketball, so the students invented a game amongst themselves. Watching them discuss rules and form teams together, without adults, showed a formation of collaborative behaviors. This was something new and exciting regarding behaviors that I had not noticed happening before play implementation. Previously, adults were needed to explain how to form teams and make rules; however, the students began conveying an understanding of how to do those things on their own.

RQ2

The final research question regarding how play-based learning impacted literacy skills in kindergarten students generated different findings. Some common barriers that affect literacy are dyslexia and cultural diversities, such as language. Traumatic events such as poverty or abuse cause children to learn differently which means teaching needs to be constantly adjusted. Sitler (2009) suggested that traumatic events overwhelm systems that give people a sense of control and are marked by violence indicating life in poverty being one such instance (pp. 119-120). Traumatic conditions children encounter prohibit rigorous learning to occur, because coping with concerns diverts energy away from cognitive activity (Sitler, 2009).

For students who experience trauma, focusing on school is less important because survival impacts daily functioning. Academic learning and building relationships are put to the side so other needs can be met. As previously mentioned, regarding Maslow's hierarchy of needs, meeting physiological needs along with experiencing feelings of security and belonging assists children in building confidence and self-awareness. Adding play-based learning to daily schedules would allow time for children to make sense of all the different environments and learn from peer experiences in a developmentally appropriate and stress-free way. Human development is constructed in our experiences and natural play lets inquiry lead that innovation.

Unfortunately, missing literacy skills can be challenging to uncover in kindergarten students due to age and lack of exposure to a language-rich environment. Academic demands have discouraged students from being natural problem solvers. Fine and gross motor skills, which are a large piece of kindergarten readiness that coincide with building literacy skills, are enhanced through play because play offers active learning through whole-body experiences

using moving, seeing, and doing. Play-based learning also encourages literacy development of language and vocabulary through responsive conversation and storytelling.

The rigorous literacy curricula and assessments used in K-5 classrooms demand students to perform at levels similar to others their age and receive average scores for learning to be considered successful. Formal instruction of core subjects was discussed in Bowdon (2015) who found that students in kindergarten are studying reading and math content that is more advanced than that covered in 1998 with instruction time jumping from 32% to 77% (p. 34). While topics covered in the literacy curricula are typically age-appropriate, expectations for performance do not always match life circumstances. Children's backgrounds are not being considered when standards are being put into place and the push for so much at younger ages is setting up situations of failure. Teachers are required to teach students who present different backgrounds and circumstances that may impede the "one-size-fits all" teaching. "Rather than testing narrow skills, we should broadly gauge growth in cognitive, social-emotional, and physical areas, as well as creativity and other essential qualities of human life" (Almon & Miller, 2011, p. 3).

Alignment to Theoretical Framework

I used the conceptual framework as a guide for this study shown in figure 2.1 to review how play-based learning affected social-emotional and literacy skills with adjustments of the teacher's role. Play-based learning can be either structured (teacher-directed) with objectives and modeling or unstructured (child-led) with the choice to freely explore in a safe environment. The key concepts of this study included these two types of play-based learning, social-emotional behaviors, and literacy skills. Theories from Piaget (1969), Vygotsky (1966), Mraz (2016), and Jones (2020) were compared and combined to help support findings and evaluate this study. My study parallels a few other play-based studies with the social piece and then branches out into

how literacy skills develop through play; specifically, literacy growth as an extended piece of play-based learning strategy implementation. The majority of these studies have been done in other countries with only a few being completed in the United States. My study fills a gap showing how play-based learning implementation can influence social-emotional behaviors and build literacy skills.

Constructing a Foundation

Jean Piaget (1969) believed that children acquire, or construct, knowledge in stages. Kindergarten students are in the preoperational stage of development that allows the imagination to grow logical thoughts. By allowing free exploration during play on child-led days, students learned from others how to use tools and were given the chance to socially interact without adult interruptions. Asking peers offered a comfortable and invaluable learning technique that assisted constructing a foundation in a collaborative culture. Play promoted safe learning environments for my students with opportunities to learn from same-aged peers and helped build knowledge from others' experiences. Offering play-based learning with age-appropriate communities taught my students diversity and led interaction they may not normally partake in. "Piaget asserts that the development of play progresses from purely individual processes and idiosyncratic private symbols to social play and collective symbolism" (Nicolopoulou, 1993, p. 4).

Play builds imagination and collaboration by working with others to grow learning. Some of the play-based learning stations I created purposefully to require the students to take on roles or jobs specific to the topic. Piaget's (1969) theory of cognitive development presented that "progressive ideology views education as helping the child achieve higher levels of development as a result of structured, though natural interactions with the physical and social environment" (Spodek, 1988, p. 205). Students experimented to make sense of real-world situations over the

duration of this study through planned units that integrated vocabulary and roles in thematic units. Building communication through those play roles helped my students develop reasoning and asked higher level thinking questions among same aged peers. The higher-level thinking questions that arose from autonomy that occurs during play can foster a love of learning. Bautista et al. (2019) argued that the inclusion of play can be justified on the educational value that there can be an increase in knowledge through engaging tasks that lead to innovative thinking (p. 718).

Societal Connection

Parents, daycare providers, teachers, and society all play a part in shaping the development of children. In learning from their environments by observing and participating, children's personalities begin to emerge. In this study, play-based learning helped build collaborative behaviors, strengthened turn taking and helped with self-awareness of the social-emotional learning piece. Play-based learning stations I created linked learning and socialization together. Children's understanding of thematic units and job roles used in play was nurtured by inviting community members and parents into the classroom to elaborate on these topics. My play-based study allowed me to ask stakeholders to participate in the educational process, linking an 'outside society' helping to model real-world scenario integration.

Since human development requires social interaction to develop the brain, I encouraged independent and group work during play to foster different ways of learning that kindergarten aged children need to be successful. Hruby (2011) stated,

> The impact of what the neurosciences have to tell us about literacy development, language, and learning will arrive when biochemical and anatomical pathways have been mapped from environment to genome indicating quite profoundly that our environmental

> history is a major factor in the nature of our social, emotional, and intellectual development and our educational propensities. (p. 320-321)

Kindergarten aged children inherently have some communication abilities but some that need to be learned. Vygotsky's (1966) theory on the zone of proximal development discusses those unsupported and supported capabilities of children. Vygotsky's (1966) "notion of 'social situation development' to specify interactions between the child and the social environment that lead to achievement of the developmental accomplishments in one period of life and that will prepare him for the next period" (Karpov, 2005, as cited in Bodrova, 2008, p. 359-360). Empathic behaviors were also investigated, yet little growth occurred most likely due to the age of the students. During this study and by reflective journaling, I found out what my students knew and used it to design and adapt lessons that were appropriate for their knowledge levels.

Purposeful Play and Playful Mindset

Play-based learning uses developmentally appropriate opportunities that serve a purpose to cultivate a friendly environment of discovery. Mraz (2016) and Jones (2020) recently proposed a purposeful play theory that offers a different type of learning with hands-on activities that are age appropriate. Negotiation and exploration at this level with hands-on activities and adult supervision inspires a growth mindset. Bodrova (2008) discussed the idea of play as a leading activity stating, "Not all play can be considered a leading activity because not all play-like behaviors promote development to the same extent" (p. 363). Her article goes on to discuss mature play and how scaffolding make-believe provides a systematic play intervention that use toys and props symbolic of a theme (Bodrova, 2008, pp. 365-366). By offering play-based learning in my kindergarten classroom, I was able to enhance the core ideas in the literacy curriculum with integration of science/social studies topics.

Play stations that were used in this study were designed with toys and tools so students could explore subject matter differently. This cross-curricular technique used play stations where the students could freely explore and make decisions to learn about various topics. Objectives were set and even though the students were unaware that learning was taking place, literacy growth occurred during this study. In offering play-based learning, my students were excited about collaboration and the openness of play. “Framing instruction in this way represents an essential stance to teaching and learning, an inquire stance, characterized by repositioning curriculum as the outcome of instruction rather than as the starting point” (Ray, 2006, as cited in Mraz et al., 2016, p. 151).

Implications

Findings from this 18-week study of a small focus group showed improvement in social-emotional behaviors and slight improvements in literacy skills. Those findings suggested that play either did or did not help social-emotional learning and literacy skill development in kindergarten students. To keep up with learning skills of collaboration and critical thinking, educators should consider using play-based learning in their classrooms to encourage lifelong learning to occur and not fear adjusting pedagogies. Administrators and curriculum directors should research ways or form committees to experiment with play in all classrooms. By using current core subject curricula and standards, and adjusting to the needs of students, play planning is not hard but does take some time to design. Teachers need to realize when they adapt lessons on the fly, they are already creating new ways to ensure learning happens. Since play is a natural characteristic of children, use them to guide the planning. As students age, transformation of play lessons can happen gradually and logically because including play or projects in teaching is one

small adjustment of scaffolding. What follows are ways teachers can make classroom practice more stimulating by using unconventional methods that encourage all learners to be involved.

Recommendations for Classroom Educators

Allowing children to explore with same-aged peers and play to learn in a safe setting builds confidence and supports mistakes as a discovery technique in education. Teachers are capable of exciting students with innovative strategies that benefit all learners. Early childhood education should focus on building a foundation conducive to learning, and play-based learning offers exploration of educational environments that encourage genuine experiences.

Make Classroom Practice Exciting

A kindergarten classroom should be "a place where children grow big ideas, make new friends, and dig deeply into exciting investigations" (Dinnerstein, 2016, p. 22). Play-based learning excited the students in my kindergarten class, and they enjoyed the freedom to play with few constraints. Even though the play spaces I created changed quickly and frequently due to time constraints of this study, it was exciting to watch behaviors transform and personalities take shape. Students who knew a lot about topics helped share their knowledge with others and those who needed help with materials learned to ask questions. Once the students understood that play allowed for independence, topic inquiries and discussion increased at a developmentally appropriate level. Students also became mindful of voice levels and attitudes when cooperating with peers during play.

Behaviors of collaboration and sharing started out as challenging but after a few weeks, students understood the importance of communicating needs. Collaboration is important for all ages and necessary for success in many aspects of life. "In order for learning and the interaction to take place there must be adaptation, which maintains an equilibrium between assimilation and

accommodation" (Mellou, 1994, p. 95). Students started to show improvement in working together to complete tasks and communicated better during play stations by the end of this study. Taking turns for this age was difficult but discussions of how to ask and share took place. Play-based learning appeared to help students learn to work together in a variety of situations and helped them to understand different perspectives on agreed upon solutions.

I was fortunate that my administrators and the parents of students in this study were willing to permit me to explore play-based learning. Teachers are always on the hunt for new ways to teach skills, and as mentioned previously, history showed that preschool and kindergarten classes once used play as a vehicle for learning. Taking something like a kitchen playset and watching conversations take place about what materials there are helps build communication and curiosity. Assigning jobs within the kitchen advanced thinking and collaboration. Sharing and taking turns took shape naturally because a safe nurturing environment was provided. So many things can be done with one simple playset: counting dishes, patterning, sequencing, writing lists for groceries, reading recipes, vocabulary and many more ideas surface during play.

It is easy to teach students who are excited and want to learn, and play-based learning offers a way they can be themselves. Engaging activities with no predetermined schedule can increase effectiveness of core subjects if observations and reflections guide the planning using prior knowledge of the students. "Because the world that children experienced was an organic one – not organized by subjects or categories - units or projects which integrate subject knowledge around themes or experiences became the vehicle for educating young children" (Spodek, 1988, p. 210). Thematic units spark interest and adult guidance of skills facilitates learning. Learning goals can still be set and mastery will happen when children are

developmentally ready. By purposefully planning play-based learning stations, my classroom morphed into an enhanced discovery zone scaffolded for all learners.

Use Outside the Box Teaching Strategies

Some teachers plan lessons by sticking to what is comfortable because assessment data masks a feeling of job security. Core curricula is provided to educators with limited training, but most of the instructional materials are interpreted by teachers and used in their vision. Standards are written as an outline looking for a middle ground and commonalities across the country. Graue (2009) discussed how the expectations kindergarten children face are steep; having evolved without a clear sense of purpose and the current focus on benchmarks has focused effort on what is tested rather than on what is learned (p. 30). Many teachers try to find a variety of ways to teach and want to help foster a love of learning. Play exploration and freedom of choice allow children to learn at their own level and through peer interactions understand matters in a developmentally appropriate way.

Literacy skills continued to morph throughout this study to include letter formation, vocabulary building with word cards, and creative storytelling with details, all of which improved over this 18-week study. Engagement in stations and creativity in writing increased while my students were participating in play activities. Play-based learning offered time for exploration of assorted tools and materials which strengthened hand muscles (i.e., screwdrivers). Students became better at tracking in writing with picture vocabulary card centers because they practiced tracing and then writing on paper. Upon completion of this study, exposure and adult discussion assisted with adding details and using describing words when writing.

Elkind (1988) addressed an appropriate way to teach through projects similar to a progressive method, suggesting “progressive education influenced early childhood education

programs, then kindergartens changed" (Elkind, 2008, as cited in Spodek, 1988, p. 210). Games were modified, and activities were created to help children understand environments, representing their play, art, and stories in which *they* shared (Spodek, 1988). During this study, play-based learning excited students and increased their inquiry during academic stations. Students were asking for more play at the end of this study so they could learn about topics in a different way, not just sitting at a desk listening to lectures. Behaviors showed improvement and led students to start to understand the value of peer ideas. Listening to others and working toward a common goal increased problem-solving skills and risk taking in a safe environment with adult modeling available if warranted. Immediate feedback was always provided, and real-world connections were made to solidify comprehension of play stations.

Embrace All Learning Styles

Play-based strategies offer all different types of learning and encourage social learning too. "Rather than decreasing the amount of time children spend in play in favor of explicitly teaching standards-based academic skills, research indicates that teachers can adapt the role of play in learning to enable opportunities to support students' social, emotional, and academic development within the content of play-based learning" (DeLuca et al., 2020, p. 459). Play-based learning uses all the senses, and since curiosity leads children's choices, natural consequences appeared showing students possible outcomes. Kinesthetic, auditory, visual, and read/write are four types of learning kindergarten students use to explore. Observational and reinforced are two types of social learning kindergarten students use to communicate. Developmentally appropriate learning transpired throughout my study, where students learned about feelings, like self-awareness and empathy, to interact with others. Over time, students became open to working with peers and started trying new things.

During play stations, a variety of tools were used to invite hands-on learning while some stations encouraged listening and creating with visual aids. Different sizes of tools along with toys and real tools seamlessly tied play to real world jobs. If students were unfamiliar with a tool or topic, they withdrew to look for something they were familiar with. Being able to choose a station allowed for movement to occur as the child saw fit and the time constraint of one hour regularly upset students who were immersed in an activity. Interestingly, in the beginning of this study students had little interest in working with peers and were quite hesitant to try new things. With adult guidance, failure and mistakes tested determination and students began to understand these things helped strengthen experimenting skills.

"When children play they are uninhibited and most often not focused on an end product" (Mraz et al., 2016, pp. 89-90). Trying new things is not always easy and relying on others to guide thinking can be intimidating. I noticed students had limited problem solving skills, but by the end of this study, they were more willing to try new things instead of waiting to see what happened. Failure was a challenging feat to describe to kindergarten students, but through some modeling during stations, that fear seemed to ease. Experimenting can cause fear of the unknown and I wanted to make sure students understood it was better to try and fail than to not give effort. Students were beginning to understand that their mistakes led to finding solutions, and their problems could be solved in a multitude of ways. Problem solving, collaboration, and communication had significant amounts of growth by the end.

Parenting and Early Childhood Education

Parents' education levels, occupations, and living arrangements are some of facets of the family dynamic that influence a child's learning. "Typically, parent involvement is defined as parent participation in school activities such as volunteering or observing in the classroom,

attending parent-teacher conferences, planning or serving on advisory committees and participates in school social events" (Powell et al., 2010, p. 270). Parents are a child's first teacher and early childhood educators depend on learning and inquiry to begin at home. Parents can offer a variety of experiences through playthings and playmates to help incorporate a culture of acceptance. Parents can also assign chores and set routines at home to start the process of learning in a comfortable environment. The simple tasks of playing games and holding dinner table discussions build communication skills needed for successful transitioning to a more formal educational setting.

Early childhood educators need to remember to focus on developmentally appropriate activities and plan play-based learning daily. Preschool should be a place where children explore differently than at home, with a variety of others who are the same age and have opportunities to problem-solve and collaborate freely. Preparing students for a more formal educational setting as they get older can be done by enforcing schedules and routines with achievable academic tasks and a multitude of social interaction options. Play-based learning stations and opportunities to engage frequently with same-aged peers built confidence in my students with an understanding of real-world scenarios, and hopefully built a strong foundation for learning. "Children need advocates for play, while teachers need a village to support their role as play-based early childhood education advocates. Moreover, teachers need the support of a village to empower and nurture their ongoing efforts to provide developmentally appropriate play experiences" (Wood, 2014, p. 50).

Transparency facilitates smooth transitioning and there are many ways communication between school and families could occur. Conferences or family nights allocate ways to demonstrate how teachers connect play to core subjects, and to explain how the play process is

evolving. Monthly or quarterly newsletters could highlight topics and patterns of needs that have surfaced. With explicit direction from teachers on how stations are formed to include the expectation of content and curriculum integration, stakeholders would have clarity and become involved by offering expertise of their professions.

Subtle Shift for Districts and Administrators

Schools' administration and curriculum directors could consider play-based strategies as a new style of learning by communicating advantages and disadvantages before and during the school term. While there is no set curriculum for play, recently created social-emotional standards indicate that there is a need for change in education. "Think about implementing standards as a set of goals. Goals give us direction. They shape the purpose for everything that goes on" (Gronlund & Rendon, 2017, p. 42). Social interactions are needed for success in group and individual settings. Self-regulation and positive interactions influence daily relations through listening to others and effectively communicating to reach common goals. Play-based learning offers those outcomes.

Gronlund and Rendon (2017) describe standards as a blueprint for aspirations from society paired with children's knowledge that should provide quality, equity, consistency, and transparency (pp. 38-39). These standards are often written and/or accepted by an umbrella group of people who have some expertise in teaching and rely on assessment data to form these guidelines. Teachers are to follow these content and performance standards, showing what students should know and what students should be able to do. Training sessions and pedagogies are then shaped accordingly so those standards can be met, and standardized tests show effectiveness of the combination of those items. The pieces of this puzzle that are pivotal for success are the numerous ability levels of students and family lifestyles that disturb this nicely

laid path. Teachers are taught to differentiate daily to meet all students' needs and that concept should be common practice for curriculum developers and standard committees too.

Allowing time for play to happen daily could also assist with collaboration on problems. "Collaboration is an action, a way of approaching others with the attitude that thinking together will always yield more than thinking alone" (Mraz et al., 2016, p. 72). Establishing relationships and managing decisions is dependent on how students are taught to deal with others and real-world situations. Play-based learning offers many advantages to these skill developments and evolves as children age into project-based learning. Project-based learning is similar in the fact that both independence and partnerships are needed to complete assignments. Since play-based and project-based strategies are not common practices and there are no manuals to direct teaching, teachers must invest time and energy to create meaningful stations that correlate to current curriculum and standards. Mraz et al. (2016) expressed, "As children begin to understand and experiment with the principles of collaboration and negotiation, they are writing their own curriculum of friendship and fairness and constructing an understanding of the power of listening and hearing and valuing the perspective of others" (p. 86).

Advocating for Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Looking at the connections among the theoretical backgrounds used in this study and play-based learning strategies implemented in this study, it is important for educators to understand that standards are simply guidelines and curricular items provide an outline that directs subject matter. Building a strong foundation for learning is achievable through the creation of peer relationships and exposure to things that are interesting to students. In order to help students at their levels, we must not fear putting in extra time to adjust subject matter to fill in the missing pieces necessary for successful vertical transition between grade levels. Teachers

can easily identify objectives and goals in the classroom by implementing play-based strategies during teaching schedules. The work done through play teaches standards in a diverse and appealing way for all age brackets.

Throughout this study, I easily aligned play-based learning to literacy and social-emotional standards in reading, mathematics, science, and history. Using the KDSE standards for those topics side-by-side with my teaching manuals was an effortless task. Because it's important for children to love learning, teachers must include appealing ways for skills to be acquired. Play-based learning does not feel like 'school' learning because it involves hands on, engaging activities that connect to real life. Lastly, including play-based learning in the classroom opens an opportunity for home-school connections. Calendars or lists of ideas could be sent home for parents to connect things being learned in class. The purposeful planning of the play-based part of this study was not hard because I followed my curriculum and the standards, but I did it through integrating the developmentally appropriate approach of play-based learning into my classroom.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the findings from my study increased my awareness of the need for change in education, some unanswered aspects appeared after this study concluded. There were several gaps in my study which involved 1) using technology, 2) the COVID-19 pandemic, 3) time constraints, 4) not using a researched based play program, and 5) the lack of diversity in my district. Suggestions provided here could improve future studies looking to determine if the integration of play-based learning helps with social-emotional behaviors and literacy skill improvement in other classrooms.

Technology use and devices are great assets for learning and are a growing phenomenon, however discussions of use in school must take place. Educators are tasked with how to include technology but must address how to utilize it in a constructive fashion. Tablets, phones, and I-pads can accommodate a variety of learning styles to boost collaboration. Enriching subject matter by searching the internet provides engagement and prepares students for future learning. Digital platforms allow ease of time management and flexibility, but inequality of resources could pose problems for some. High poverty families may have struggled to obtain technology necessary for online learning and test scores dropped dramatically. Online learning has grown, and some say it is convenient; however, barriers of isolation and motivation to complete tasks could lead to disengagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic shaped this group of learners and educators in significant ways. Communication and conflict progression happen through peer interactions and preschool/school attendance. This type of socializing was reduced due to health concerns of COVID-19 and the mannerisms that are learned from exposure to others was disrupted. Students were faced with exploring new ways to learn and engage through masks. Social distancing eliminated extracurricular activities and play groups. Support from teachers was harder to deliver because interactions and nonverbal clues typically used in the classroom during face-to-face conversations vanished and hands-on resources were scarce. The self-efficacy of teachers was put to the test in developing new lessons and adapting to a new teaching style, abandoning the relationship building that transpires in the regular classroom.

Limitations on time allotted for play during the school day posed a drawback to this study. The restraint of only two hours a week for play offered little time for true freedom of independent choices during set play stations. If play was allowed daily, more information could

be documented for a more thorough investigation of how play influenced behaviors and literacy skill growth. Researching how play affects kindergarten students over a longer period, like a three-year span for example, would offer more notable performances with a broader population base.

Planning the play stations came with the intent to use ideas from standards and current curricula to compile tools and materials relative to community helpers, stores, and a polar unit. The play-based program that was created and used for this study was not researched-based but designed by kindergarten teachers' interpretation of science and social studies standards. Inclusion of the core reading and math curricula my district used was considered and used to plan stations as well. In addition, social-emotional standards were used to make lists of age-appropriate interactions and behaviors for me to use for conclusions upon completion of this study. With the inclusion of other teachers in planning, a lack of consistency due to differing pedagogies and opinions could also have limited the play-based station creation.

The lack of diversity of the students and high poverty level of my school contributed to fewer outside experiences and the absence of exposure to a variety of things. Using a different location in the United States with more accessibility to materials (the financial aspect of purchasing materials in my district warranted the writing of grants to obtain needed items) and a wider variety of presenters or field trip options to relate learning to real life could result in different outcomes. Different study populations with other ethnicities may also bring different results. My district does not have a wide range of ethnicities and since the size of my community is very small, access to limited resources influenced some of the play planning topics.

Play-Based Learning with Centers

Making play content relevant and relatable to reading and math through small group activities encouraged my students to try new things and learn in a different way. Thematic units helped them connect our weekly reading, writing, and math skills to real-world experiences. "Play impacts the development of early literacy by affecting oral language development, development of metalinguistic awareness and the development of imagination" (Bodrova, 2008, p. 362). It was evident to me that as my students were begging for more play time, a change had to happen. In using play-based learning stations, I saw that my students began to question more, collaborate better, and disruptive behaviors subsided. Inviting community members into the classroom made the connection solid and exciting. I found I needed to change my thinking and teaching styles on the fly, mainly due to the students' lack of exposure to topics and knowledge of materials. Mraz et al. (2016) stated, "The fact is many of our students come to school with different levels and kinds of play experiences" (p. 39). The background knowledge of the experienced students helped with creating cooperative learning groups by allowing me to switch group participants freely according to who knew what.

The benefits of play-based learning through planned center activities started to become noticeable after a month of experimenting. Having taught kindergarten and first grade for 12 years, I started to see my students gain a love and interest in school. They were excited, wanted to learn more, and were disappointed when we moved onto a new play topic because they were still exploring the previous one. By using centers, I was able to focus more on differentiation of topic knowledge and deepen discussions by adding more to the play stations when students asked. I noticed an increase of creativity in writing and more engagement with peers, and by

incorporating their ‘wants’ into the play-based learning stations, I offered my students ownership and encouraged individuality to create confident learners.

Center time allowed me to provide attention to and help students at various academic levels. The use of centers also allows for socialization, independent work time, and collaboration with peers. As an early childhood educator, I know the attention span of younger students is short, so organizing stations helps integrate all skills in a way that fits their learning style and focus. For this study, I used science and social studies topics relevant to kindergarten to build play stations. Stations/centers are simple ways to use small group instruction and to build independence. Adults should model how all centers are supposed to look and the gradual release of working independently helps build confidence and trust. The teacher centers can reinforce key skill practice with differentiation while the child centers repeat familiar routines in achievable ways.

I began this study with child-led stations, allowing free choice of where to play and explore. Initially, child-led play days posed challenges because it appeared they did not want to choose where to play. Students had the option to work alone or with peers at predetermined stations, but I quickly learned that most students were not comfortable choosing freely. Many of them wandered around appearing unsure of where or how to start. Students were looking for direction and often moved quickly between stations, telling me they were finished with all stations before time was up. Witnessing the hesitation, I would recommend play stations start out structured and directed by a teacher to model what to do and review expectations. Even though it was my hope that students were internally motivated to voluntarily play, confusion led to a guided type of play. I told the students to play safely and have fun with the materials at each

station, reiterating to share or take turns. Communication and negotiating problems began as strenuous, but over time those skills helped students learn about perseverance and collaboration.

Aligning Standards and Core Subjects

Teaching requires planning and building units that are interesting to students to encourage learning. I have built thematic units before, designed around standards to use and integrated core subjects with play. Speaking and listening standards were also addressed and social-emotional learning standards were incorporated to build a well-rounded unit. Core topics of literacy and mathematics were included in the stations as well, mainly to keep the routine of learning fluid. The district's reading curriculum used offers a variety of topics inclusive of science and social studies; however, there were missing topics, and the pace of the reading core moved quickly, deterring ample time for understanding and mastery. Integration of all subjects in the stations allowed core subjects to be reviewed and practiced.

Planning units and establishing objectives with guiding questions led the teaching. The units were developed to be age appropriate and the use of summative assessments helped evaluate what students learned once the unit was complete. Keeping a journal and reflecting daily after play stations occurred helped me piece together student needs and transform the units to fit knowledge levels. Throughout the course of this study, one point that commonly arose was that students were lacking in vocabulary and questioning techniques. Many times, words were lost and simple talking between peers involved complaining and misunderstanding. Adapting vocabulary and posing questions to lead thinking assisted with meaningful learning. Each topic had reflection entries that helped shape the units for future use; however, since all students bring new experiences to the classroom, continual adjusting will be necessary to stimulate learning.

Closing Thoughts

Play may be looked at as a way of learning that is unstructured and unfair. Proper utilization of play in teaching should be examined due to the free nature it implies for a new way of learning. Parents may question using play in school because of the loose structure behind it, comparing a more structured teaching where learning to read and write is 'important.' Others may also question what ages are appropriate for beginning/ending play-based learning. Administrators may be concerned that state assessment scores will be influenced negatively by play because it limits academic time. As with any new change, adding or removing something takes time for actual results to happen. There are always positive and negative results behind those changes which must be considered.

I did not anticipate how much the students would enjoy having free choice time to play and explore. It appeared students did learn from each other and once the schedule was set, the students were excited to play and upset if that time was missed. Collaboration and communication were two areas of growth for all students. Students also became better at coming up with ideas together. Due to time limitations, the findings showed mostly positive results and I would be curious to see how other teachers would utilize play if it was accepted in their district.

Perhaps changes in education that may occur could involve standard-making committees, administrators, parents, and teachers. Administrators and committees involved with making standards could reach out to teachers to build a solid foundation for a curriculum. Parents need to communicate with teachers (and vice versa) to form an alliance so children have a team supporting them. Curriculum writers follow rules to appease teaching the standards and preparation for state assessments; however, that may be setting up teachers and students for failure. We cannot ignore the changes from past education movements, but as a society we can

adapt to benefit children and inspire change. Teachers should be given some grace and autonomy when planning because they are the experts. Professional development could consist of teachers who use play-based learning presenting and sharing their ideas. Having a growth mindset challenges teachers to evaluate pedagogies, looking for strengths and weaknesses in their teaching. “Several ways exist for planning a trip. One way is to find a destination and get there as quickly as possible. The trip is all about *being* there, not *getting* there. It puts the race ahead of the journey” (Graue, 2009, p. 30). Every year poses a new set of students who have personal issues and random knowledge, so to make a difference in people’s lives, we as teachers must embrace this continual challenge and find a way to make learning an exciting lifelong journey, not a race.

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Appendix A - Lesson Plans

Play Station One Community Helpers: Doctor, Dentist, Veterinarian	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Doctor/dentist/vet kits, ice cube trays, yarn, toothbrushes, x-ray pictures, puzzles, books, stuffed animals, different types of paper, crayons/markers, pencils, vocabulary cards, doctor/nurse hats, pictures
Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*doctor*, *dentist*, *nurse*, *veterinarian*, *patient*, *cavity*, *protective clothing*, *emergency*, *health, check-up, stethoscope, hygienist* waiting room, rabies (shots), filling, band aid, cast, surgery, floss, medicine
Behaviors/Jobs *These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Doctor/Nurse, Patient Veterinarian, Assistant, Pet Owner Dentist, Hygienist Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do doctors/dentists/vets do? 2- Where does each one work? 3- How does each one help people? 4- What tools are specific to these jobs? 5- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 6- Who can doctors/dentists/vets help? 7- When do doctors/dentists/vets work? *Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for

	(i.e., chairs for a waiting room or a stapler) that is not provided. *If applicable - make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking (i.e., students asked for a phone and a clipboard to sign in before they saw the doctor).

Play Station Two Community Helpers: Construction Worker, Army	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Lincoln logs, wooden blocks (with pictures to build), Legos (with step-by-step instructions), tool benches with toolboxes, box of nuts and bolts to explore, Knex, puzzles, books, army playsets with tanks and fences, different types of paper, crayons/markers, construction hats for coloring, vocabulary cards, blueprints for planning, pictures
Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*Construction site, carpenter, officer, army, tank, blueprint, design, hammer, wrench, screwdriver, drill, nut, bolt, camouflage, protective clothing* Fort, army helmet, protective hats, barricade
Behaviors/Jobs	Construction roles vary (leader and helpers) Army roles vary (officer – sergeant and lieutenant were discussed)

*These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do carpenters/army do? 2- Where does each one work? 3- How does each one help people? 4- What tools are specific to these jobs? 5- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 6- Who can carpenters/army help? 7- When do carpenters/army work? *Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for (i.e. wood for hammering into) that is not provided. *Make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking (students asked questions about going to war and machine guns, but these topics were omitted and redirection occurred)

Play Station Three Community Helpers: Fire Station, Police, Post Office	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Fire station and police playsets, fire trucks, police cars, Lincoln logs, jump ropes, hats, badges, Legos (with step-by-step instructions to build police cars), puzzles, books, different types of paper, markers, rulers, glue, pictures,

	mailbox, envelopes, stamps, lacing cards, tissue paper, mailbag
Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*Firefighter*, *station*, *hose*, *ladder*, *protective clothing*, *emergency*, *police officer, danger*, *hazard, law enforcement, assist, fierce, mail carrier, letter, delivery* helmet, boots, axe, tank truck, radar, handcuffs, protective vest, masks, arrest, sirens, save/safe, barricade, gauge, gear, Dalmatian (dog), police dog, captain, air tank, smoke, flame, speed, robbery, cop, chief
Behaviors/Jobs *These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Firefighter roles vary (chief and helpers) Police roles vary (chief, captain, officer) Mail carrier and recipient Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do firefighters/police/mail carriers do? 2- Where does each one work? 3- How does each one help people? 4- What tools are specific to these jobs? 5- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 6- Who can firefighters/police/mail carriers help? 7- When do firefighters/police/mail carriers work? *Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for (i.e., water for hose) that is not provided.

	*Make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking (i.e., students asked for an axe to 'break walls' in the house to help get people out faster, one student planned out a path beforehand).

Play Station Four Stores: Bakery, Donut Shop, Ice Cream Parlor	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Play food, felt donuts/cookies/cakes/pies, playdough, cookie cutters, rolling pins, spatulas, oven mitts, cookie sheets, donut boxes, aprons, plastic cupcake holders, tissue paper and cloth ice cream balls, sundae cups, scoops, frosting bags with yarn, sequins, pompoms, cotton balls, pictures, vocabulary cards, puzzles, books, pictures, different kinds of paper, markers, cash register and play money
Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*Bakery, baker, cook, server, customer, menu, order, sundae, sequence, ingredients, recipe* Frosting, sprinkles, caramel syrup, whipped cream
Behaviors/Jobs	Baker/Cook Server Customer

*These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do cooks/bakers/servers do? 2- Where does each one work? 3- How does each one help people? 4- What tools are specific to these jobs? 5- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 6- Who can cooks/bakers/servers help? 7- When do cooks/bakers/servers work? *Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for (i.e., to-go containers) that is not provided. *Make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking (i.e. ask order of mixing ingredients)

Play Station Five Stores: Fast Food Restaurant, Pizza Parlor	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Play food and utensils, plastic/Styrofoam containers, plastic cups and cup holder, pizza pans, cash register and play money, felt food pieces, aprons, ticket books, baskets for food, stove, pans, flippers, pictures, puzzles, books, different kinds of paper, markers

Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*Cook, server, customer, menu, ingredients, recipe, waiter/waitress, coupon* Combo order (like at McDonalds)
Behaviors/Jobs *These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Cook Server/waiter/waitress Customer Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do cooks/servers/customers do? 2- Where does each one work? 3- How does each one help people? 4- What tools are specific to these jobs? 5- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 6- Who can cooks/servers/customers help? 7- When do cooks/servers/customers work? *Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for (i.e., toys for kid meals) that is not provided. *Make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking

Play Station Six Stores: Grocery	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Play food, cereal boxes, oatmeal containers, breakfast pastry boxes, macaroni boxes, milk containers, butter tubs, yogurt cups, cash register and play money, puzzles, books, different kinds of paper, markers, paper and plastic sacks, toy baskets and carts (any food containers parents brought were used)
Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*Cashier, stocker, sacker, manager, customer, receipt, deli, department (i.e., meat, fruit, dairy)*
Behaviors/Jobs *These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Cashier Stocker/Sacker Manager Customer Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do cashiers/managers do? 2- Where does each one work? 3- How does each one help people? 4- What tools are specific to these jobs? 5- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 6- Who can cashiers/managers help? 7- When do cashiers/managers work?

	*Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for that is not provided (i.e., credit cards). *Make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking (i.e., one student asked about the deli, but did not know the term, which brought on the discussion of specific grocery areas).

Play Station Seven Polar: Igloos, Ice Fishing, Arctic Animals	
Tools/Materials *provided by teacher	Large box to build igloo, bubble wrap, yogurt or applesauce cups, marshmallows, ice fishing buckets and rods, Lincoln logs, Legos, puzzles, books, paper, markers, rulers, polar animal play sets, penguin game, glue, tape
Terminology/Vocabulary *Italicized ones were provided by the teacher with a picture for writing stations, others were added on notecards per students' background knowledge	*Igloo, polar, habitat, Arctic, penguin, walrus, narwhal, polar bear, arctic fox, blubber, camouflage, protection, need, want, Inuit, auger, scoop, insulation, glacier, tundra, lichen* Fur, boots, gloves, snowmobile, skis, sleds, bait, shelter, North and South pole, hibernate
Behaviors/Jobs	Eskimos/Inuit

*These were presented on teacher-directed days to guide structured play, rotate responsibilities, and learn all roles.	Dog/Sled racer (*Iditarod - came up after some discussion)* Ice Fisher Collaboration, empathy, self-aware, responsibility (i.e., take turns, share, communication)
Questions/Observations/Other	1- What do Inuit people do differently than you? 2- How do ice fishermen prepare? 3- What tools are specific to these jobs? 4- Why are you doing _____ with _____? 5- Who can Inuit help? 6- When do Inuit work? *Given materials, observe students during play. Make notes of what they may ask for that is not provided (i.e., asked how to make a fire to keep warm). *Make notes of who does what job and listen to conversations between students to investigate empathy or collaboration. Consider how these jobs were decided upon within those discussions. *Look for problem solving skills for higher level thinking. (i.e., some discussion of different snow races occurred; how to make a fire to keep warm)

*Entire Play-based Stations for one school year

Topic	Focus	Timeline
Community Helpers	Firefighters/Police/Post Office Doctors/Dentists/Veterinarian Construction Worker/Army Teachers/Hair Salon (omitted due to lack of materials)	8 weeks
Restaurant/Stores	Bakery/Ice Cream Parlor/ Donut Shop Fast Food/Pizza Place Grocery Store Kitchen (omitted due to time)	6 weeks
Weather/Seasons	Hibernation/Arctic Adaptations (stopped here) Seasons Weather Plants	6 Weeks
Habitats/Animals	Life Cycles Frogs/Butterflies Zoo/Farm Ocean/Forest	7 weeks
Space	Sun/Planets Rockets/Astronauts Maps/Directions	6 Weeks

Ideas for Planning Play

- Include thematic related activities like vocabulary, and integrate writing, math, science, and social studies.

- Present specific terminology on cards and place in a pocket chart with pictures for definition purposes.
- Utilize higher level thinking questions and cooperative groups (with assigned jobs) to complete tasks.
- During certain stations, jobs of students could include recorder, materials manager, speaker, leader, and timekeeper.
- Lay tools out that are specific to the jobs and allow students to explain what each one is and what it is used for.
- Invite community/family members to present their job/skill to the students.
- Have students create a thank you note for the presenters.
- Use standards listed on the KSDE website to meet curricular goals during collaborative planning.

*The plan included one day of unstructured play to observe background knowledge and one day of structured play with the teacher asking questions and offering suggestions. The second semester included three days of unstructured play that was used for more data collection for future planning.

Questions from the teacher on teacher-directed days:

1. What tools are needed for this job? What do the tools do?
2. Describe the job responsibilities of the helper.
3. Where/when does this helper work? How does this helper help?

Appendix B - Lesson Descriptions

Unit One – Community Helpers

Community helpers of dentist, doctor, and veterinarian were combined because of similar vocabulary and tools. Play stations included a doctor and a veterinary office with waiting rooms and reception areas, two dentist stations, a writing station, and an art station. In each waiting room, there were animals and kits with tools (see Appendix A) for the students to use, share, and explore. In both receptionist areas, there was a phone, calendar, chairs, and a notebook. The dentist stations had two tool kits, x-rays, ice cube trays, toothbrushes, and yarn. Jobs that were not addressed on child-led days were offered on day two, which was teacher-directed, after observing play and noting missing content knowledge.

The writing station included pictures, paper with a variety of writing utensils, vocabulary word cards with pictures, and books. This station needed explaining the first few times as students were unsure of what to do. Suggestions were made to the students to choose a picture, a book, or a word card to try and copy letters or words for handwriting practice and tracking. The art station had three different doctor puzzles, markers, glue sticks, scissors, band aids, doctor/nurse hats, and construction paper. Again, students needed some direction as to how to proceed so suggestions of decorating band aids and hats with markers and/or construction paper were provided. Limitations of one hat and one band-aid were also laid out so there was less waste of paper.

Army and construction were the next topics covered in the play-based learning stations. Station materials included two children's workbenches with toolboxes, a playset with army figurines and tanks, a writing station, and an art station. Each workbench had a set of tools for students to use or move freely around the room to 'repair' things. The army playset was set up on

the floor because it had fencing and was large. The writing station had pictures, paper with a variety of writing utensils, vocabulary word cards with pictures, and books. The art station had four different puzzles, coloring pages, a blueprint, markers, scissors, glue sticks, hats, and construction paper. Like the first three-week rotations, students had child-led days and teacher-directed days. The writing and art stations still needed some guidance. The construction speaker brought in kits from Home Depot and each student got to make a wooden bank. One parent who was in the Army Reserves brought four different vehicles to school for students to explore and soldiers in his unit came for a question/answer session.

Fire, police, and post office were the final community helpers that were used in this study. Play stations contained two toy fire stations with trucks, a toy police station with vehicles, a mailbox at the writing station, and an art station. The fire and police station toys were used with little explanation given while the mailbox area needed modeling and direction. The mailbox writing area had lacing cards, play stamps, envelopes, address labels, vocabulary cards, and paper to write letters. The art station had a variety of boxes and tissue paper, a jump rope, fire hats, four different puzzles, coloring pages, scissors, markers, glue sticks, police hats and badges, and construction paper. Our local fire department and police officers made appearances in our school to discuss fire safety and allow exploration of service vehicles. The post office was unavailable to attend the speaker session.

Unit Two - Stores

The next play unit concentrated on stores and included a bakery, donut shop, ice cream parlor, pizza place, fast-food restaurant, and grocery store. In the first two weeks, students played with tools and materials related to bakeries, donut shops, and ice cream parlors. The next two

weeks focused on pizza place and fast-food restaurant. The final two weeks students played with grocery items.

All the stores had toy food items related to their content and were mixed with teacher made materials due to lack of funds (some of the food was made with felt, yarn, or other craft materials that were donated). Job roles of the cook, server, and customer rotated when students were in the bakery/donut shop and the writing station was included. Vocabulary cards and menus were used to either copy or circle the order with speaking and listening were standards that were addressed. One station's items included playdough, cookie cutters, spatulas, and cookie sheets. Another station had math and reading games, like counting/placing sprinkles on a donut mat and following directions to decorate a cake. The art station allowed for the design of either a donut or a cookie, as well as having puzzles, books, and sequencing activities. The bakery/donut shop only had four play stations since the main part (bakery) needed more students to operate. Pies, donuts, cookies, and cakes were made from felt pieces so layering could occur. Pie tins and cupcake pans were available along with plastic to-go containers. Frosting bags were filled with yarn to imitate frosting. The guest speaker worked in a bakery and brought cupcakes for the students to decorate with frosting and sprinkles.

The next unit was an ice cream parlor which had similar stations that the bakery had, but materials changed to fit the theme. Job roles of the server and customer rotated when students were in the ice cream parlor and the writing station was again included. Vocabulary cards and menus were used to either copy or circle the order. Sequencing was a part of this topic and making a banana split by following direction cards was at the art station. Math and reading games included ice cream scoop numbers and letter matching. Puzzles, books, and ice cream toys were at a station. The 'ice cream' for the parlor was made from rolled up socks and balls of

tissue paper, students used real ice cream scoops and sundae cups to make orders. The guest speaker was a member of our local board of education, and she made butter with the students. She had an old butter churner that each student had the chance to use and churn.

The fast food restaurant and pizza place were combined for the next topic of play. Job roles of the cook, server, and customer rotated when students were in the restaurant and with enough materials those jobs were also at the pizza place station. The writing station was again included in both places with vocabulary cards and menus being used to either copy/write or circle the order. Food toy items were at the fast-food restaurant and pizza place stations to build orders. Math and reading games that were fast-food or pizza related were created for the last station. Following directions, using shapes, and sequencing to put a pizza together was one option, using the vocabulary cards to build other menus or signs for the restaurants was at the art station. The art station was offered to design a new pizza to add to the menu.

Grocery store was the last topic of play in the store unit. The students set up an area on a bookshelf to make a grocery store. Toy food items were used along with cash registers, play money, baskets, and bags. Jobs included cashiers, stockers, sackers, and customers. Students made grocery lists from vocabulary and/or recipe cards and local store newspaper ads. Since the unit took place close to Thanksgiving, a math station was added to plan a feast for their family. Each student was given a paper plate with a list they were to fulfill and a budget they were to follow. Students cut out pictures of food items and glued them on a paper plate. They filled in a receipt with the cost found in the newspaper ad to see if they had enough money for their meal plan. Budgeting was discussed but in an informal and suitable lesson.

Unit Three – Polar/Arctic

The last unit was a polar unit that included building igloos, ice fishing, studying Arctic animals and the polar habitat. This unit was extended for a total of six weeks to finish it for some additional information. Play stations included building individual igloos with marshmallows and yogurt cups as well as collaborating to decorate a classroom igloo, an ice fishing game with sight words, vocabulary, and letters to use to complete a story, Arctic animal measuring station, a couple of sensory tubs with lists to search and find, and the art station had fish coloring pages, foil snowflakes, and materials to make dioramas for habitats.

Some direction was needed on how to start building individual igloos, so we took time to discuss what a house looks like when built with Legos. The class watched a few videos and read some books to gain some background knowledge. Questions from the teacher led to peer imaginations taking over igloo building and drawings on paper led to building them. After a few students began building, others were excited to participate having seen the ideas from peers. A model diorama was made by an adult and available for the students to have a visual. A principal from another building who was also a parent of one of the students, came with ice fishing gear to share how it was done. He had a picture presentation, brought in an auger and ice bucket for them to watch drilling holes in ice, and was dressed in attire for students to learn about.

Appendix C - Action Research Resources

These are some of the resources that helped me determine which research method would best fit my study. Some are listed in my references and were cited specifically, while others were read for educational purposes and to a provide direction for this study.

Ballenger, C. (2019). Reframing the achievement gap: lessons from puzzling students. *The Reading Teacher*, *73*(2), 141-147.

Clark, J.S., Porath, S., Thiele, J., & Jobe, M. (2020). *Action Research*. New Prairie Press. https://newprairiepress.org/ebooks/34

Efron, S., & Ravid, R. (2020). *Action research in education, A practical guide second edition.* The Guilford Press.

Hine, G. (2013). The importance of action research in teacher education. *Issues in Educational Research*, *23*(2), 151-163.

Mills, G. (2003). *Action research: a guide for the teacher researcher*. Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Sagor, R. & Williams, C. (2016). *The action research guidebook: a process for pursuing equity and excellence in education*. Corwin.

Schoen, S. (2007). Action research: a developmental model of professional socialization. *The Clearing House*, *80*(5), 211-216.

Sullivan, B., Glenn, M., Roche, M., & McDonagh, C. (2016). *Introduction to critical reflection and action for teacher researchers*. Routledge.

Appendix D - IRB Approval

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | University Research Compliance Office

TO: Lotta Larson
Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number IRB-10770

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 07/28/2021

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Play-based Learning integration and the effects on Social Emotional Behavior."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 07/28/2021

EXPIRATION DATE:07/27/2024

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

203 Fairchild Hall, Manhattan, KS 66502 | (785) 532-3224 | fax: (785) 532-3278

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Rick Scheidt on 07/28/2021 12:16 PM E

Appendix E - Consent Letters

Incorporating Play-Based Learning into Early Childhood Education

Informed Consent-Adults

You have been invited to participate in a research project dealing with play-based learning. This study is being conducted by the principal investigator, Kimberly Boxberger, a kindergarten teacher at Simpson Elementary and will take place during the 2021-2022 school year. If you have questions at any time, please contact her by email at kboxberger@usd407.org or by phone 785-483-6180.

Purpose of the Research

As a kindergarten teacher, I am curious to see if changing typical learning within the classroom helps with self-confidence and empathy. The purpose of this study is to see if including play into these kindergarten classrooms helps with social-emotional behaviors. Thematic units centered around the standard based curriculum that is in place will be used to enhance various learning styles.

Procedures and/or Methods

According to the school calendar and state-mandated standards, I have planned play-based stations that will allow children to explore different tools and techniques for job related tasks. By observing cooperative groups, collaboration among students, individual problem-solving, and goal setting, I hope to see if using a play inclusive strategy helps build various skill strengths. To better help me with my data collection, the main procedures used will be recording your students during the allotted time for play inclusion, in person observations, surveys, open-ended interview questions and discussions. The length of this study will be 2 hours a week for 18-27 weeks, dependent on daily or unplanned interruptions. Interviews and discussions will be scheduled during our team planning as needed.

All data will either be securely stored in a locked cabinet, password protected, or encrypted for confidentiality purposes. Pseudonyms will be used to protect selected candidates and master lists of codes will be kept separate from notations.

Risks/Benefits Anticipated

Minimal risks, if any, can occur with all research. While none are anticipated at this time, some potential risks may include, but are not limited to: psychological or social variables, revealing sensitive family matter, encountering offensive subject matter, and/or physical exertion risks. Participating in this study will not necessarily benefit you directly, however it will help myself and other teachers learn more about children's learning styles, their behaviors, play-based strategies, and the rigor of the curriculum. Upon completion of this study, relevant results will be sent in the form of written communication to each participant.

Terms of Participation

I understand this project is being used as research and my participation is voluntary. I understand I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participation without explanation, penalty or loss of standing.

To voluntarily allow my participation in this study, I will sign below. Your signature indicates you have read and understand this form and willingly agree to participate in said study under the terms described. Your signature acknowledges you have received a copy of this form.

Any information you provide, or any data received from this study will be kept confidential and properly destroyed once this study is complete to the full extent of the law. Should future research take place only by above mentioned principal investigator, all identifiable information will be removed, and no further consent will be needed.

If other questions arise or are not answered by Kimberly Boxberger, please contact Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224 or Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Participant Name_____

Participant Signature_____ Date_____

Incorporating Play-Based Learning into Early Childhood Education

Informed Consent-Child

You and your child have been invited to participate in a research project dealing with play-based learning. This study is being conducted by the principal investigator, Kimberly Boxberger, a kindergarten teacher at Simpson Elementary and will take place during the 2021-2022 school year. If you have questions at any time, please contact her by email at kboxberger@usd407.org or by phone 785-483-6180.

Purpose of the Research

As a kindergarten teacher, I am curious to see if changing typical learning within the classroom helps with self-confidence and empathy. The purpose of this study is to see if including play into these kindergarten classrooms helps with social-emotional behaviors. Thematic units centered around the standard based curriculum that is in place will be used to enhance various learning styles.

Procedures and/or Methods

According to the school calendar and state-mandated standards, I have planned play-based stations that will allow children to explore different tools and techniques for job related tasks. By observing cooperative groups, collaboration among students, individual problem-solving, and goal setting, I hope to see if using a play inclusive strategy helps build various skill strengths.

To better help me with my data collection, the main procedures used will be recording your child during the allotted time for play inclusion and in person observations. Video recordings will be done using a school issued i-Pad that will not be directly connected to the internet, will be password protected and in possession of the researcher at the end of every school day. New passwords will be used for each session. The length of this study will be 2 hours a week for 18-27 weeks, dependent on daily or unplanned interruptions.

All data will either be securely stored in a locked cabinet, password protected, or encrypted for confidentiality purposes. Pseudonyms will be used to protect selected candidates and master lists of codes will be kept separate from notations.

Risks/Benefits Anticipated

Minimal risks, if any, can occur with all research. While none are anticipated at this time, some potential risks may include, but are not limited to: psychological or social variables, revealing sensitive family matter, encountering offensive subject matter, and/or physical exertion risks.

Participating in this study will not necessarily benefit you or your child directly, however it will help myself and other teachers learn more about children's learning styles, their behaviors, play-based strategies, and the rigor of the curriculum. Upon completion of this study, relevant results will be sent in the form of written communication to each participant.

Parental Approval/Terms of Participation

I understand this project is being used as research and my child's participation is voluntary. I understand I may withdraw my consent for my child at any time and stop participation without explanation, penalty, or loss of standing.

To voluntarily allow my child to take place in this study, sign below. Your signature indicates you have read and understand this form and willingly agree to allow your child to participate in said study under the terms described. Your signature acknowledges you have received a copy of this form. ***If you would like your child to participate in this study, but do not want him/her to be video recorded, please sign appropriate line below.*

Any information you provide, or any data received from this study will be kept confidential and properly destroyed once this study is complete to the full extent of the law. Should future research take place only by above mentioned principal investigator, all identifiable information will be removed, and no further consent will be needed.

If other questions arise or are not answered by Kimberly Boxberger, please contact Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224 or Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Participant Name_____

Participant/Guardian Signature_____ Date_____

My child can take part in the study but **IS NOT** to be video recorded.

Participant Name_____

Participant/Guardian Signature_____ Date_____

Appendix F - Debrief Statement

Debriefing Script
Play-based learning Study
Kimberly Boxberger

A common problem observed in classrooms is that social-emotional behaviors are required for successful developmental transitioning and academic learning. The background for the project was built on how children are naturally wired to do the thing that will naturally help them grow: play. Play-based learning can be seen as either child-led or teacher-directed and is a type of early childhood education that assists students with cooperative learning that builds communication skills necessary for social-emotional development. Both intrinsic and extrinsic learning happen during play, so by offering students choices, freedom, and lack of restraint in play-based learning, deeper thinking can evolve and reinforce problem solving.

The research questions were 1) what happens when play-based learning strategies are implemented in a kindergarten classroom, 2) how does play-based learning influence social-emotional behaviors in kindergarten students, and 3) how does using play-based learning impact literacy skills? This study occurred in a kindergarten classroom in an elementary school and began with the observation of all students. From those observations, a small focus group of students was randomly selected and used to code behaviors and literacy growth. Video recordings and personal observations took place over the semester. All documents were kept in a confidential place, password protected, and were destroyed upon completion of this study.

Thank you for allowing your child to take part in this research project. The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to develop an understanding of how structured and unstructured play-based learning strategies for Preschool-Kindergarten (Pre-K) students affect social-emotional behaviors and literacy skills. This study focused on relationships between play,

behaviors, and literacy by observing kindergarten students in a regular classroom setting. A variety of play-based learning stations were utilized by incorporating mandated curricular items and allowed the role of the teacher to rotate actively as a participant, modeler, or facilitator.

Overall, the positive effects of implementing play showed growth in collaboration and problem-solving while the negative effects showed little growth in empathetic behavior development. Please direct current or future questions that are related to this study or the conclusions of it to kboxberger@usd407.org. Any research used or other related articles and studies can be given to those interested upon conclusion of this study. If questions are not answered by Kimberly Boxberger, please contact Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224 or Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Again, thank you so much for allowing your child to participate in my research. Without your help, I could not have completed this study for my degree. I am grateful to have been inspired by the project to improve education.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Boxberger
STEM Teacher/Reading Interventionist
Kansas State University Doctoral Student
kboxberger@usd407.org
kimbox31@k-state.edu
785-483-6180