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Reading between the play lines, a play-based research study: children at play acquiring literacy skills socially and through self-discovery

Brianne Siderio

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**READING BETWEEN THE PLAY LINES
A PLAY-BASED RESEARCH STUDY: CHILDREN AT PLAY
ACQUIRING LITERACY SKILLS SOCIALLY
AND THROUGH SELF-DISCOVERY**

by

Brianne Siderio

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy and Special Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Reading Education
at
Rowan University
Dec 18th, 2014

Thesis Chair: Valerie Lee, Ph. D

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Dedications

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my mother and father,

Carmen and Chris Siderio

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Valerie Lee for her guidance and help throughout this research.

Abstract

Brianne Siderio
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2014
Valerie Lee, Ph. D.
Master of Arts in Reading

The purposes of this qualitative research were to observe a group of kindergarten students during play exploration and determine how kindergarten students acquire literacy skills socially and through self-discovery. Students demonstrated a wide acquisition of literacy skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language during play exploration. Students acquired these skills socially among peers and through self-discovery while experimenting and exploring with play materials. Themes that emerged from play exploration sessions and interpretations of play episodes and student work are discussed. Implications for future research in the area of play in kindergarten are considered.

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Chapter I

Scope of the Study

I graduated from Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ in May 2011. That summer I landed my first teaching job for the upcoming 2011-2012 school year. I interviewed for a full-day kindergarten teaching position, and got the position. I am currently in the same position at the same school. I did my student teaching at this school. So not only do I teach the grade I student taught, but my cooperating teacher is now my grade level partner. I am really happy with my current position. When I student taught in kindergarten during the 2010-2011 school year, my cooperating teacher incorporated play at the end of the day for about 25 minutes. She or I never felt it was enough time, but the students had to learn reading, math and social sciences which took up most of the day.

When I started teaching in 2011, I tried to incorporate play into the day, but the state of New Jersey and new administration started to crack down on the curriculum with the new Common Core Standards that came out in 2010. New curriculum began to be adopted that was aligned with the Common Core Standards. During my first year of teaching I was able to incorporate some play but just not enough play due to the upcoming changes and lack of time due to the curriculum.

During my first year of teaching, I was assigned with my grade level partner from administration to attend 7 New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines workshops. The workshops spanned from October to April. There was one workshop a month, and in March and April there were group presentations. During these workshops, the newly adopted Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines were discussed among a room full of 40 kindergarten educators. The guidelines place a heavy emphasis on developmentally appropriate kindergarten practices in the twenty-first century. One of the

major guidelines is implementing play in the kindergarten curriculum. The workshops demanded play in kindergarten, and suggested that play centers be set up in kindergarten classrooms.

Many heated discussions took place among us educators, and issues such as lack of time in 1/2 day kindergarten classrooms came up, demanding curriculum, the implementation of the Common Core Standards, large classes with no assistants, administrative demands, increased testing in kindergarten, etc. Everything I learned at these workshops was amazing, and so many of the play ideas and lessons would be phenomenal in a kindergarten classroom. But when it came to reality, and as my grade level partner and I conversed, we would always say we just have no time and must follow district demands. We have to teach the curriculum we are handed, meet district and state standards, and get these kids reading, writing, and applying math skills by the end of the year, therefore time for play is not an option. Explicit instruction and small remedial strategic intervention groups were an option, but not a full day of play where children could explore and learn at their own level in play exploration centers.

We had to read several articles over the course of these workshops which were very interesting, and intriguing. We were given a manual called: *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines* (2011) which is broken down into three sections: Guiding High-Quality Practice in Kindergarten, School Structures that Support High-Quality Kindergarten, and High-Quality Kindergarten in Action. Yet helpful and useful, being able to teach this way in my kindergarten classroom was not a huge option. I was among many kindergarten educators who felt this way. At the closure of the workshops, we had to do a presentation about how we incorporated play into our day. My

grade level partner and I worked together and reported back on the 25 minutes of play we allowed each day (when time allowed), but we still discussed the challenges and struggles we faced.

The next three years of teaching, including this current year, brought major administrative changes and major changes from the state of New Jersey. Not only have we adopted a new math curriculum, but we have adopted a new phonics program called: FUNdations, a new reading program called: Reading Street, a new science program called: Interactivescience, and a new Social Studies program called: Social Studies Alive. The Core 4 is strongly present in kindergarten at my school. All of these programs are Common Core Aligned, rigorous, and include assessments to monitor the progress of each child.

The computerized MAP assessment that is Common Core aligned has been adopted and is given three times a year to assess student growth in math and reading at my school, as well as serve as our SGO's to assess teacher accountability. My kindergarten class just received their tablets and will be required to work on their tablets and develop keyboarding skills and other reading and math skills in the upcoming new Year. Technology takes precedence in my school. The demands and changes are vast, and make learning through play centers difficult.

As an early childhood educator, I have many different beliefs and philosophies of how a kindergarten student should learn and develop, and it is very challenging trying to implement my beliefs amidst all the mandates and changes to push the kids to read, write and apply math skills at such a young age, instead of learning through play. Play is the job of a child, and this is one important way children at the kindergarten level learn. So at

the moment, I am muddling through these challenges and trying to see how I can incorporate and align my beliefs with the mandates given to me, so that I am following the district and state requirements, as well as meeting the needs of each child in a developmentally appropriate way.

The Story Behind the Question

I really began to think about how children in kindergarten should learn during my first class in my Master's Program for reading. The first class in the program I took was called: *Teaching Reading and Writing Across the Grades*. This course gave background in current theory and practice, which is related to emergent literacy, word identification, comprehension, study skills, and recreational reading in grades K-12. The required text: *Lenses On Reading: An Introduction to Theories and Models* (2011) was very interesting to read. I started reading about so many theories, and started to make the connection to how I taught, and why I was really teaching in the way I did. I started to really understand my teaching philosophies and beliefs, and I was now able to explain why I taught how I did. I always believed that children should learn through play, but with so changes and mandates it really made this type of teaching and learning a struggle.

But as I read about the Unfoldment Theory, my belief in learning through play grew stronger and stronger, and I wanted to learn more. According to Rousseau (Tracey & Morrow, 2011), children should evolve naturally through their own exploration and curiosity of objects in the world. Rousseau didn't believe that children should be forced to learn, but educators should lead them to discover their own learning. I kept this theory in my mind and thoughts constantly. I shared my thoughts with kindergarten teacher friends, colleagues, friends and family. I vented about the strict rigid curriculum that left

little time for play exploration. I tried to let the kids play as much as they could after curriculum mandates were met, and I also tried to turn some lessons into play exploration lessons. But I was never able to keep a consistent play pattern going. This concern came up in other classes during my Master's program. During my Summer Reading Clinic in 2014 at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ ideas of play emerged from the different theory discussions that took place. I shared my emerging ideas about play in kindergarten with a professor, and she said that what I was thinking was something to really ponder, and could potentially become a research study. Hence, learning through play as my research study was birthed.

An example of implementing Rousseau's Unfoldment Theory would be learning through play exploration, and this study will explore how children's learning naturally evolves through play in order to deepen, acquire, and learn literacy skills through social interactions and through one's own self-discovery. Play is the work of a child, so I do my best to incorporate playful activities into lessons, while still teaching to the state standards and objectives. It can be a challenge at times trying to exercise your own autonomy as a teacher, but I must abide by state and administrative standards. I feel that play is lacking in kindergarten classrooms across New Jersey, and that play is a developmentally appropriate approach for kindergarten students. I think that kindergarten students should be able to develop, acquire, and learn literacy skills by being deeply immersed in play, which is a developmentally appropriate instructional strategy for this age group.

Statement of the Problem

The book, *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*, focuses on play in kindergarten. The book offers many articles from different authors that advocate for play in kindergarten. This book explains how kindergarten has radically changed the last two decades from a play-based atmosphere, to literacy and math curriculum being taught rigorously and kids being tested, instead of learning through play and exploration. The book is an advocate to get play back in classrooms. It offers many ideas to help get play back in the classroom (Miller & Almon, 2009). This is true for kindergarten classrooms across New Jersey and the United States. Since I am a kindergarten teacher I can validate that this change is true. Kindergarten is rigorously academic now.

The newspaper article, Kindergarten crunch: Lack of playtime killing joy of learning, expresses how too much teaching and testing is done in kindergarten for the mastery of literacy and math skills. It addresses how play can bring out the intrinsic motivation for children to learn through exploration of play materials such as blocks, a sand and water table, and props for dramatic play. It states that some kindergarten classrooms might get 30 minutes of playtime a day while some get none. It addresses that play is crucial for kindergarten kids because it is a way for kids to socialize, figure things out, and make sense of the world (Stewart, 2009). This is so true for what I refer to as the “new” kindergarten these days. My kindergarten kids are constantly tested on a daily basis, weekly assessments, benchmark assessments, topic and unit assessments, the MAP assessment three times a year, etc. Testing can leave little time for play exploration which

is crucial in the development of a child. Children crave play, and play can be an avenue where children can learn and acquire literacy skills socially and through self-discovery.

According to Miller (2009), kindergarten should be a balance to combat this problem of lack of play in kindergarten. The classroom should neither be loosely structured, ran in a Laissez-Faire style with ample play, and lack of adult support resulting in chaos, or be a didactic high structured classroom, where the teacher leads all instruction with scripted teaching and little or no play. According to Miller, a kindergarten classroom should be a classroom rich in child-initiated play and playful with focused learning, where children are free to explore their world through play with the guidance of teachers, and where the teacher guides student learning with rich, experimental activities.

Statement of the Research Question

Since play is drastically being eliminated from kindergarten classrooms, and being replaced with rigid curriculum that is aligned with Common Core Standards, my research study incorporates and explores the importance of play for kindergarten children. My research question states: How does learning through play help kindergarten students develop and acquire literacy skills socially and through self-discovery? The daily observations during playtime and student work samples and artifacts, will serve as evidence as to how children learn literacy skills through play exploration.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter two provides a review of literature that addresses the need for play exploration in kindergarten which is better suitable for children of this age to learn literacy and math skills. Chapter three discusses the design for the study, demographics

of the community and class being studied, data collection used, and how the data will be analyzed. Chapter four discusses the findings in the research study, themes that emerged during play sessions and analyzes and interprets the data in order to unlock how play exploration can help children acquire literacy skills. Chapter five presents to the reader conclusions of the study and implications and suggestions for further research in the field of play exploration.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In the 19th century, kindergarten classrooms were seen as a “garden for children” a place where children grew at their own pace. The whole child was taught, recognizing each child’s physical, social/emotional, and intellectual growth and development (Moyer, 2001).

Play in Kindergarten

This section of the study will connect literature about learning through play, to the current research conducted for the purpose of this thesis. The following section gives a definition of play for the sole purpose of this study, will connect why play is being eliminated from kindergarten, the disadvantages of play being eliminated from kindergarten classrooms, the advantages of a play based kindergarten, struggles and frustrations that many kindergarten teachers are facing each day in a kindergarten classroom where play is limited or eliminated, and implications for change to bring play back into the kindergarten classroom, so children can be children and do what they do best: play.

Play Theorists

According to Smidt (2011) she describes some key thinkers in the field of play. One of the most significant theorists of play was Lev Vygotsky (1934). He believed that from birth, a child is very active in making sense of the world. He believed that play was a powerful way for a child to do this, and spoke of play as ‘*imagination in action*’. Play in his opinion was a powerful learning tool, because a child is able to go beyond the ordinary and imagine what could be. Jean Piaget (1932) was another theorist who theorized play, and believed that children used their schema during play and used

exploration of physical objects that lead to classification and logical thinking in the act. Piaget's play theories explored the moral thought children developed in play, in order to judge what is right and wrong, and what one should do and not do. He also theorized that play was a cognitive process, where children construct their own knowledge while learning through play exploration (Ortega, as cited in Lytle, 2003). Jerome Brunner (1983) sees play as a mode of learning where the child engages in play to learn more about the world and people, objects and relationships in it. Play to him is not an activity but a way of doing something. Children use play to answer questions they have through hands-on and real-life situations. Barbara Rogoff (1990) has interests in play social groups in which she calls social play. She likes to explore what children do together socially during play, without the presence of an adult. She believes the presence of an adult changes the dynamics of the play situation. Tina Bruce (1991) believes in 'free-flow play' (self-chosen play, where the child is in total control), and argues that children bring their current learning into the act of playing which brings about or reinforces new learning (Smidt, 2011).

Definition of Play

Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky believed in an early childhood curriculum where children learned through play. This is known as the Vygotskian-based, early childhood curriculum. Vygotsky referred to play as being typical dramatic or make-believe. "Real" play according to Vygotsky includes three important components: 1) when children play they create an imaginary situation 2) they take on and act out roles, and 3) follow a set of rules that are associated with a particular role (Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong (2013). For the purpose of this research study play will have roots in

Vygotsky's definition. The definition of play for this study is where one has self-control over their play experiences to become fully motivated and engaged during play through the use of objects and manipulatives to acquire literacy skills.

The New Kindergarten: Work and No Play? How Come?

Kindergarten has drastically changed the last decades. Kindergarten classrooms used to be playful environments, where children learned through play, but now kindergarten classrooms are driven by curriculum to meet local, federal, and national standards and state and national test scores. According to the Association for Childhood Education International (Moyer, 2011), eliminating play from kindergarten has been brought about by these changes:

1) societal pressures 2) misunderstanding about how children learn 3) aggressive marketing of commercial materials that are truly inappropriate for kindergarten-age children 4) a shortage of teachers who understand how to work with young children and 5) the reassignment of untrained primary teachers in kindergarten in areas of declining enrollment. (pg. 161)

Another reason why kindergarten is becoming more and more academic is that research states that this is the best age to start learning how to read, from what is known about brain-based learning. This may be true, but should kindergarten students have to pay the price because this is known as the "right time" to start reading instruction (Curwood, 2007)? It might not be the right time for every child.

According to Russell (2011), who conducted a study to assess how kindergarten has changed since the 1950's, kindergarten is a place where academics take precedence over the development of the child. He refers to kindergarten as a new "academic press"

rather than a “garden” of learning. He gathered his data from newspaper articles, policy documents, and professional association activities. He found that in 1950 3% of kindergarten was academically based, and 31% was developmentally based that focused on the child. Today, he found that in the 2000’s 8% of kindergarten is developmentally based, and 83% is academically based.

He provides a detailed description of the “garden” kindergarten versus the “academic press” kindergarten. A developmentally appropriate kindergarten allows students to explore, and learn activities that are developmentally appropriate for the child. It allows children to manipulate objects, confront problems and solve problems through exploration, develop social skills and learn behaviors needed to successfully learn in school. It is student directed that is grounded in cooperative learning, and there is a balance between social-emotional aspects, and academics are to a lesser degree. Assessment takes the form mainly in teacher observation. Whereas, an academically driven kindergarten, is teacher-led, academic subjects and basic skills are taught explicitly, whole group instruction and guided practice is the main form of instruction, children receive information from the teacher and repeat the information back in skill and drill, assessment takes the place in formal assessments and testing, and kindergarten students must meet mastery of basic content and benchmarks in order to proceed to first grade.

There is a crisis in the kindergarten, and children need to play in school. Children are being taught and tested on literacy and math skills in developmentally inappropriate pedagogical ways (ex. worksheets, workbooks, scripted teacher manuals, etc.), instead of learning literacy and math skills through play exploration, where the child can explore

using their bodies and senses to explore how the world works and unlock curiosities. (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Disadvantages of Kindergarten Classrooms with no or Little Play

Kindergarten students are at a disadvantage, because play is a child's work and the way they learn. Children learn self-reliance through play, problem-solving skills, and spatial thinking. Play nurtures a child's social, physical, emotional, and moral development. Children are becoming burn-out at this age, due to the mandated academic mandates and inappropriate curriculum, instead of learning through play to explore one's own creativity, develop motor skills, social skills, and boost self-esteem. As cited in Curwood (2007), in the book, *The Power of Play*, by David Elkind, Ph.D., he explains that when children play, they elicit their own questions and create their own learning experiences. This allows the child to develop individually, make self-discoveries, acquire literacy and math skills in their own timing, and develop social skills while learning through play. Play is the necessary work of a child, and play teaches many things like socialization, numbers, letters, reasoning, imagination, innovation, and coping mechanisms. As cited in Curwood (2007), the books, *Play = Learning and Einstein Never Used Flashcards*, make a bold statement that play is a pathway for learning, not skill-and-drill methods mandated by developmentally inappropriate curriculums. When kindergarten classrooms eliminate a play-based program, students fall short of the crucial skills stated above.

As adults we know that sometimes we have to learn through play in order to learn and make sense of things (ex. learning a new program on the computer, etc.). We also know that we learn best, when we are learning about things that we want to learn about.

Therefore, play is essential in kindergarten classrooms, because children learn best when they are interested in the materials and activities they are involved in. Play gives children the autonomy to explore objects and interact in areas of their choice, so that children can quench their own desires for learning. Play will equip children with how to get along, listen to one another, and how to cooperate with each other. These skills are things that cannot be taught in a teacher-directed classroom where literacy and math skills are being drilled into children for hours (Engel, 2010).

Catsambis and Buttaro (2012) in *Kindergarten as Academic Bootcamp* study how kindergarten has become increasingly academic and how ability grouping in reading takes a negative effect on students' psycho-social development. The authors express how kindergarten should be a place where students at this age, especially since this may be a child's first experience with school, be a place where students get excited about learning, learn how to get along, and respect authority. Instead, the students are "trained" in academics, and expected to follow the "command" of the teacher like in a military setting. The study tracked 8,770 students in 750 schools through K- 8th grade through surveys that were administered by the teachers. The surveys assessed how students felt about ability grouping in reading, and the results showed a negative effect on most learners, and only deemed positive results for the students in the higher track. The study concluded that kindergarten should be a year of preparation that emphasizes a desire to learn at the onset of school, and not begin to create problems in students' psycho-social development in the kindergarten year, that students will carry with them to each successive grade.

Advantages of Kindergarten Classrooms with Play

According to Kagan, Carroll, Comer, & Scott-Little (2006), early childhood begins with the whole child, not the curriculum. This should be the central focus, because when play is not a crucial component of kindergarten curriculum, kindergarten classrooms lack in the areas of physical, motor, social, and emotional development, due to kindergarten standards, curriculum, and assessments that are more and more prevalent in kindergarten classrooms. Research indicates that these types of kindergarten classrooms are not developmentally age appropriate, and the quality of pedagogical methods should be reassessed. When classrooms are rich in play they address the five domains of a child's development and learning: physically, socio-emotional, approaches to learning, language and communication development, and cognition and general knowledge.

Play nurtures these five domains for kindergarten children who are budding in each of these areas, and they will blossom more and more in these domains if play is initiated in the kindergarten curriculum. Playing with others in kindergarten has been linked to better adjustment to the kindergarten classroom setting, and to nurture the social nature of children through peer relations (Eggum-Wilkens, Fabes, Castle, Zhang, Hanish, & Martin, 2014).

According to Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer & Pianta (2005), small-group settings allow teachers to have more personal teacher-child interactions in the classroom, which are not easily available in whole group settings. During small group settings, teachers are better able to extend or expand conversations with children to form deeper relationships, and learn more about the child. In classrooms where small-groups are

prevalent, such as playtime, children have the opportunity for deeper social conversations and cooperation with their peers. Higher rates of talking and playing will take place in small-group settings. A classroom that is intermixed with small-group settings and teacher-child interactions, such as playtime, will provide students with social exchanges that are important for the development of children

Small group settings also require less effort from the teacher and more active roles from the children that will lead to fewer behavior problems, rather than in whole group settings where children sit passively at times disengaged (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005).

Play and learning bring out the imagination within a child during play. Play allows children to learn, and children learn through the art of playing. Children's imaginations soar during social play while they play with different materials, and take on real-life roles. When children interact with objects, they give objects new meaning using their imagination. Their imagination allows them to use objects that build their understanding of society through social play interactions. These beliefs are grounded in Cultural-Historical Conceptions of Play, where Vygotsky (1966) argued that play allows children to learn about and take on roles in society (Fleer, 2011). Children may mix dirt and water in buckets, and go digging for plastic dinosaurs, or make chocolate cakes from dirt, and use the sand for sugar in the mixture. Vygotsky argued, that imagination can either lead a person toward or away from reality. Children who are immersed in deep play, can interact in conversations about the real world with the objects at hand either individually or with peers, or allow their imagination to take stance for deeper learning. Imaginative play allows children to build concepts, and play should remain an integral

part in kindergarten for greater child-centered cognitive outcomes that are developmentally appropriate (Fleer, 2011).

Kindergarten Teachers Speak Out: No Play? Why?

According to Gallant (2009) Kindergarten for children used to be a place where socializing with peers was essential, developing oral language was key, and a love for learning was the heart of kindergarten. Today, kindergarten is merely a place where students are receiving intense reading and writing instruction, participating in guided reading groups and formal writing workshops, and being forced to learn how to read and write. Kindergarten used to be a place where children acquired literacy skills through a play inquiry-based environment, where reading and writing was a natural outcome of literacy acquisition.

Gallant (2009) surveyed kindergarten teachers and found out that they are frustrated with the “new” academic kindergarten, which is less play-oriented. Kindergarten teachers have reported that they are frustrated with the amount of curriculum that needs to be taught (especially in a ½ day program), the fact that play has been “dropped” for “sit down” work and worksheets, lack of playtime which would result in materials and manipulatives that would help children develop concepts, decreasing autonomy to make curricular decisions, tensions between what kindergarten teachers believe is appropriately developmental vs. mandated curriculum, the increase in assessments, less teacher flexibility, feeling required or forced to do things (ex. teaching inappropriate kindergarten curriculum), being driven by people with no educational background or knowledge of how a kindergarten child develops and learns, and pushing these children too fast at such a young age (Gallant, 2009). These are just to name a few

of the challenges that kindergarten teachers face each day in a classroom that is not dominated by play, which is a developmentally appropriate pedagogy in the kindergarten classroom.

Implications for Change for a Play-Based Kindergarten

The most effective kind of education is that a child should play amongst lovely things.

~Plato

As cited in Miller and Almon (2009), according to the U.S. Alliance for Childhood the kindergarten classroom should be two-fold, in order to create a healthy play-based learning curriculum that is age appropriate for this age level. A kindergarten classroom should embrace child-initiated play, where the teacher guides the child's learning as they explore their learning through playful activities and be a playful classroom with focused learning, where teachers guide student learning with rich experiential activities.

Miller and Almon (2009) also suggest that in order for change to take place the following actions can be taken:

- 1) Restore play with the support of active teachers
- 2) Reassess kindergarten standards and keep the standards that promote developmentally appropriate practices and eliminate the ones that do not
- 3) End the inappropriate use of standardized tests in kindergarten
- 4) Expand childhood research to examine the impact play has on children from diverse backgrounds
- 5) allow kindergarten teachers the autonomy, integrity, and creativity they need to sustain a kindergarten classroom rooted in play
- 6) rally with organizations or

individually about the disappearance of play in kindergarten to create a national movement to get play back in kindergarten. (pg. 45)

Teachers can be the change in their classrooms to help bring play back into the classroom. Teachers can make their classroom a balanced environment, where academic-based learning and play-based learning are intertwined (Curwood, 2007). Teachers can also make academic-based learning lessons playful, while still teaching to the objective and standard for that particular lesson to meet state standards. Teachers should encourage fantasy play, art and music, and imaginative play, where the teacher facilitates play and asks meaningful higher level thinking questions, while expanding vocabulary and encouraging social interactions among peers during play (Curwood, 2007). Teachers during playtime should be active and interact with the children, rather than letting the children play as the teacher attends to other things. Play is how children learn, and playing should be considered like any other lesson, where the teacher is the facilitator and helps children deepen their play experience.

Susan L. Kempton is an advocate for child-initiated play in kindergarten. Her classroom thrives upon learning through play. She suggests that teachers should observe what types of materials children enjoy playing with the most, and incorporate these materials into play time. She encourages teachers to incorporate play materials in play centers that expand critical thinking and will provide a wider range of discovery. She thinks it is also important to make play environments dynamic and interactive, that could take on real-life settings, and incorporate more writing, reading, math, art, music, science, and language in a playful way (Kempton, 2007). It is truly the kindergarten teacher's

responsibility to be an advocate for play in kindergarten, and provide a rich playful environment where learning through play exists.

The International Reading Association in *Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children Position Statement* (1998), breaks down early reading and writing acquisition into 5 phases. The two phases that are most appropriate for this study are phase 1: Awareness and exploration (preschool), and phase 2: Experimental reading and writing (kindergarten). In phase 1 the association highlights that literacy should be promoted through related play activities. Phase 2 explains that kindergarten students should explore reading and writing skills in meaningful contexts. They suggest that early literacy activities that teach reading and writing in kindergarten, do not always look like traditional elementary school reading and writing instruction. They explain that reading and writing instruction in kindergarten should be taught in a way that makes sense to children, that aligns with children's active and social nature, that include rich demonstrations, interactions, and models of literacy. They suggest that classrooms should be rich in print activities, talking, reading, writing, playing, and listening. They highlight that teaching reading and writing in play-based activities is age appropriate for this level.

Conclusion

If more kindergarten classrooms had play in their curriculum, this not only would be more developmentally appropriate, but children would reap the benefits that learning through play provides, which is far greater than academic programs grounded in scripted teacher-led curriculum packed with worksheets, where students have little room to explore and create their own learning experiences. Play is the work of a child. Play awakens the senses and allows the child to be truly free and create experiences that are

most engaging and meaningful to them. Play far exceeds whole group settings, where children have to sit quietly and be led strictly by the teacher. Children's social interactions will increase dramatically among peers as they are playing and talking about the materials they are using, while using their imaginations to role-play in real-life situations.

Children at this age should be able to naturally develop while acquiring literacy skills and developing various concepts. New Jersey's Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines (2011) include major components that should be implemented in a kindergarten classroom, in order for a kindergarten classroom to be a successful program. The guidelines also place a heavy emphasis on developmentally appropriate kindergarten practices in the twenty-first century. One of the major guidelines is implementing play in the kindergarten curriculum.

According to Rousseau (Tracey & Morrow, 2011), children should evolve naturally through their own exploration and curiosity of objects in the world. Rousseau didn't believe that children should be forced to learn, but educators should lead them to discover their own learning. An example of implementing Rousseau's Unfoldment Theory would be learning through play exploration, and this study will explore how children naturally unfold through play and develop, deepen, acquire, and learn literacy skills through social interactions and through one's own self-discovery. Play is lacking in kindergarten classrooms, and play is a developmentally appropriate approach for kindergarten students. Kindergarten students should be able to develop, acquire, and learn literacy skills by being deeply immersed in play, which is a developmentally appropriate instructional strategy for this age group.

This particular study will further explore the ways in which play positively impacts a kindergarten child's learning development, particularly the acquisition of literacy skills, both socially and through self-discovery. The next chapter of this thesis will examine the design and methodology of this research study based upon the data collection collected over the duration of the study.

Chapter III

Research Design & Methodology

Qualitative research is grounded in research where a precise research purpose and research question is determined, but open to further inquiry and discoveries. Qualitative research also requires data collection and data analysis set to a timeline. Qualitative research requires close observations of students at work. The research design is the backbone of the study and the research questions and data collection sustain the research study to lead the study to data analysis and indications for further research on the topic of study. The main source of data collection that takes place during a qualitative research study is observation where notes are kept in a journal to write about students at work, reflect on the study, record issues that arise, and jot down questions that are still emerging during the study. Other forms of data analysis that can be used in this type of research could be interviews, surveys, inventories, audio and video recordings, photography, and student artifacts (Shagoury & Power, 2012). According to Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), a first grade teacher in Philadelphia, Gill Maimon (2004), kept a 400-page research journal where she observed children's test taking strategies.

Teacher researchers use the method of qualitative research for the purpose of conducting studies in their classrooms and/or schools. Teacher researchers strive to discover essential questions and gather data for analyzing in order to answer those essential questions. Teacher research is grounded in inquiries (ex. What is the best way to teach reading? , What are the best methods to organize group activities, etc.). Teacher research is initiated and carried out by teachers (Shagoury & Power, 2012). Teacher researchers can be the key to educational change. The theory of action of teacher

researchers can bring this knowledge collected in classrooms and schools in order to transform teaching, learning, leadership, and schooling for all learners and teachers. Not all teacher researchers need to become social activists to take their research beyond their schools, but they can help add to a particular issue that calls for change for more effective educational practices. Teacher researchers' local work could reach out to the wider educational community which could help lead to furthering educational transformation. Teacher researchers work from an inquiry stance that works within the educational system, as well as against the system in order to change existing curriculum, instructional and assessment practices, and policies in order to either challenge or sustain current educational practices. Teacher research heavily relies on what is best to promote effective student learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

The methodology used for this study was a qualitative research approach. The research design for this study included the following categories: research purpose, research question, procedures of the study, context of the study, timeline, data collection, data analysis, and conclusion. The qualitative inquiry strategies used to conduct this study included noting student's interests, teacher to student(s) discussions, student discussions both socially and individually, and teacher observations. Teachers need to observe children during play, watch them, otherwise known as "kid watching", listen to them playing, and try to find out what it is that they are trying to find out. During this time, the teacher observer should not have any predetermined goals in mind, but only to watch and try to relate to what the child is trying to do or find out. The child's interest is at hand, not the teachers (Smidt, 2011). These were recorded in my personal teacher-research journal.

Students work samples during play were collected, along with pictures that were taken of student creations during their play exploration time.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to explore how kindergarten students naturally develop and acquire literacy skills (as theorized in the Unfoldment Theory) socially and independently (cognitively) while engaged in play exploration, rather than being taught literacy skills and concepts through explicit instruction from the teacher. The Unfoldment Theory as theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), believed that children's learning would evolve naturally due to the curiosities they hold within. He felt that education during his time, did not take into account children's interests and passions. He believed that teachers should let children explore by choice skills and concepts that they were interested in. He firmly believed that children should "unfold" on their own, while learning, which can be nurtured through play exploration. He believed that reading and writing instruction should begin at 10-15 years of age, so in those prior years, children could explore their own interests and naturally develop through learning experiences that lured them in due to their own innate curiosities (Tracey & Morrow, 2011).

Research Question

The research question to drive this study is stated as such: How will learning through play help kindergarten students develop and acquire literacy skills independently and socially among peers? Objectives of the study included but were not limited to: observing and identifying the types of social interactions that take place among children at playtime, in order to see how children socially develop and acquire literacy skills,

identifying direct and indirect verbal and nonverbal exchanges taking place (both seen and heard) between students, observing what types of play materials help kindergarten students develop literacy skills best, identifying what types of literacy discoveries some kindergarten students might acquire on their own during play exploration, and observing how these children make these discoveries independently.

Shagoury and Power (2012), make the statement, “May your garden of questions always bloom”. During this qualitative research study, there are many questions that comprise the inquiry stance, and it is with great hopes that these questions bloom during this study. During this research study, the research will be carried out in my kindergarten classroom. The hopes of my research are to make discoveries that help me understand my essential questions, gather data from the participants involved, and unlock any secrets. These secrets could lead to a deeper understanding of how social interactions work, how language works, or how knowledge discovered builds upon another (Shagoury and Power, 2012). This qualitative teacher research study will allow me to interact personally with the participants and to better understand how one naturally unfolds in their own learning, either socially or through self-discovery to acquire literacy skills. I will look closely at student interactions, student conversations, students’ interests during playtime, student work samples and creations.

Procedures

In this study I observed 16 kindergarten students who were engaged in play exploration. Play centers were created and play materials changed depending upon children’s interests and discoveries. I introduced the children to each play center and made sure procedures and responsibilities for each center were made clear. The play

centers that children were freely able to explore during play exploration included the: Dramatic Play Center, Building Center, Reading Center, Library Center, Arts and Crafts/Writing Center, and Math and Science Center. Each center will include a plethora of manipulatives for the children to explore. New centers emerged as children made new discoveries during their learning and exploration. Students were asked if they would like to join in play on the days designated for this study.

Context

The community. The Borough of Somerdale, NJ was established on April 23, 1929 from Clementon Township. It was one of seven municipalities created from the now-defunct township, and one of five new municipalities created on the same date. The Borough is an ethnically and culturally diverse city. The following information is taken from the 2010 US Census Bureau. The present population is 5,261. The racial make-up is as follows: 68.2% white, 19% Black or African American, 0.1% American Indian and Alaska Native, 6.0% Asian, and 8.2% Hispanic or Latino. The numbers of households that currently exist are 1,700. The average annual household income is \$52,546. Somerdale Park Elementary School is a Pre-K-8 public school located in the Borough of Somerdale. It is the only elementary school in Somerdale. Somerdale Park School educates the diverse culture of the community. For more information about this school, visit www.somerdale-park.org. Sterling High School serves the following communities: Hi-Nella, Laurel Springs, Magnolia, Stratford and it's hometown of Somerdale. John Paul II Regional Catholic School is a K thru 8. It also offers pre-school for 3 and 4 year olds. This school has become the regional catholic school in the area of Somerdale.

The School

Somerdale Park Elementary School is a Pre-K-8 public school located in the Borough of Somerdale. Its current population is 520 students. The student to teacher ratio is 13:1. There are 42 teachers in the school. The racial make-up of the school is as follows: 47% Black or African American, 9% Asian or Pacific Islander, 11% Hispanic or Latino, and 53% White. The gender make-up is 49% male and 51% Female. 30% are eligible for free lunch. 10% are eligible for reduced lunch. The districts total revenue is \$7MM. The district revenue per student is \$14,965 and the district spending per student is \$14,027. The state testing results from the 2013-2014 school year reveal that the following percentage of students are proficient in the following content areas: 61.8% in LAL, 70.39% in Math, and 85.85% in Science.

The Classroom

The study was conducted in a full-day kindergarten classroom. Participants in the study were 16 students in the co-investigator's classroom. Participants included 9 five year olds, 6 six year olds, and 1 seven year old. The participants were 10 females and 6 males. Participates included 8 Caucasian, 5 African Americans, 1 Hispanic, and 2 Asian-American students. These students were general education students.

Timeline

The study took 6-7 weeks to complete. The children were immersed in play for 25-40 minutes, 3-5 times a week.

Data Collection

The data collection for this qualitative research study was conducted in this manner. A teacher researcher journal was kept and used at each play session. In this journal teacher observations of student interactions during play socially and individually were recorded. Student conversations were recorded in the teacher researcher journal, along with any conversations among the teacher and a student or particular group of students. Student interests were recorded, which drove the change of play materials in the centers from week to week. The teacher researcher journal also served as a place for reflection and further essential questions to help drive the study. Students' work samples from various centers were collected and pictures were taken that are included in this final report. Students' creations during play in various centers that can't be collected (ex. a picnic created in the Kitchen Center), were collected through the method of photography and are included in this final report.

Data Analysis

When a child plays, it evokes within a child deep thought, language, and activities that are intellectually appropriate for the child. Play is the job of a child. Play is not a forceful, rigid experience, but a time of exploration for the child. The child is able to create his/her own world, use language and body gestures and movements, in the way they find appropriate, and manipulate objects in the environment for their pleasure and own purpose during play exploration. Play is the gateway for a child to find out more

about one's self, others and the world. Play is the ultimate educational process for a child to dive into and release a child's intellect (Weininger & Daniel, 1992). My teacher researcher journal, data and student artifacts and work samples were analyzed to see how a child socially and/or individually through self-discovery acquires literacy skills while playing.

The teacher researcher journal and student artifacts and work samples, led to how children acquire literacy skills through play in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in my kindergarten classroom. In 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers in the United States, with teachers, researchers, and school administrators, developed the Common Core State Standards Initiative that "lay out the vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century". There are 40 standards for reading, writing, listening, and speaking that kindergarten teachers and kindergarteners are accountable for during the kindergarten school year (Rog, 2011).

The data was analyzed in four ways: content analysis, typology, constant comparison, and hermeneutical analysis. During the content analysis, the data in the teacher researcher journal, and student artifacts and work samples were analyzed for themes that emerged. The data was chunked in order to define and interpret meaning within each theme. Typology was also used, where the data in the teacher researcher journal and student artifacts and work samples were categorized into the four areas of literacy acquisition. In order to better categorize the data, constant comparison was used to name and color code the data in each category to compare the data for consistencies and differences. The color coding and data categories were put in a computer document

to better separate the data and analyze it. This helped transfer the findings into this thesis more efficiently. The data was colored coded as follows: acquisition of reading discoveries in blue, acquisition of writing discoveries in red, acquisition of listening discoveries in green, and acquisition of speaking discoveries in yellow.

Lastly, all data collected was analyzed using the method of hermeneutical analysis, where all data was up to complete interpretation from the teacher researcher in order to construct knowledge from the data collected during each social play session.

Conclusion

Chapter four of this thesis discusses the data collected and findings from the study. It includes data from the teacher researcher journal which includes teacher observations, student conversations and teacher-student conversations, and student artifacts and work samples. Chapter five discusses the conclusions and implications of the study, and recommendations for future topics of study that pertain to this specific research inquiry.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four discusses the data collected during my study, and focuses on answering my inquiry, “How do kindergarten students acquire literacy skills during playtime both socially and through self-discovery?” The following data sources were sorted and analyzed: teacher researcher journal of teacher observations, student interactions, and student to teacher interactions, and student work samples and artifacts to answer my research question. Key data was chosen to include in this section for the purpose of sharing poignant moments during play when one acquires literacy skills socially and individually, and to highlight strong themes that emerged throughout the play sessions. Themes that emerged after analyzing the data were self-control and motivation, cooperation, sharing, problem solving, imaginative play and expression of feelings. These common themes were observed throughout the play sessions.

Revisiting the Study

According to the book: *Learning to Read and Write* (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000), kindergarten teachers should focus on the developmental needs of the child and strive to provide these children with demonstrations rich in modeling, social interactions, and literacy activities that make sense to five and six year old children. Teaching literacy in kindergarten should consist of learning centers (library, drama, blocks, math, science, art, writing, and computers) where teachers scaffold learning experiences in teacher-led and child-initiated activities. As previously stated in Chapters one and two, this type of learning has drastically been taken away from the kindergarten

classroom, and play is an outdated instructional strategy. This study provided children with the opportunity to explore learning through play.

During the play sessions that took place there were many occurrences of students acquiring literacy skills during play interactions both socially and through self-discovery. The acquisition of literacy skills was evident in all play centers as the children played. Children were seen retelling stories they wrote, answering questions about stories read, telling stories from illustrations (picture reading), developing concepts of print, recognizing and naming upper and lowercase letters, blending CVC words (ex. /c/a/t), identifying and writing initial, medial, and final sounds in words, practicing letter-sound correspondence, reading and writing common high-frequency words, putting their writing skills to use by using a combination of drawing, scribble writing, letter-like forms, dictating, and writing to create various pieces of writing, participating in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about topics at their level, following rules, taking-turns, continuing conversations with multiple exchanges, asking questions to seek help, getting information, getting feedback, or clarification, describing drawings, expressing their thoughts and ideas clearly, and demonstrate commands of the conventions of the English language and usage when writing and speaking, etc.

The children acquired literacy skills through play, while still adhering to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Direct instruction was not needed during these sessions in the acquisition of literacy skills, but only that children created and discovered their learning interests. In the area of acquiring literacy skills children were busy at work during playtime developing these skills in playful ways. The data was grouped into categories to understand how students acquire literacy skills in the

four areas of literacy: reading, writing, listening and speaking, and then embedded into the themes to follow. Throughout the discussions of the emerging themes, the acquisition of literacy skills acquired both socially and through self-discovery will be evident.

Self-Control and Motivation

Self-Control and motivation seen from students throughout the play sessions was a major theme that emerged. Students took hold of play situations, decided what they wanted to create as their play situation, and this motivated many students because they were developing their own self-interest and exploring things they wanted to explore. On one occasion, a child created a story book out of paper and wrote on the cover: The Book. The child also wrote Me and Lal (an attempt at writing her best friend's name). The cover of the book displayed two people holding hand on the grass, and then two people holding hands heading to a house. The back of the created book read: The End. The child was very excited about the creation of the book. She called her friend over to look at the book. Her best friend surprisingly pulled up a chair and said, "Read the story to me." The little girl happily sat down, while her friend happily read the story, while showing the cover, reading the title, and telling the story in her own words using the pictures she created. The story was short where the student read, "We are coming home from Sweet and Sassy." The student proceeded to say that the extra blank pages were doodle pages for her friend. She then gave the book to her friend (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 14th, 2014).

This play interaction among two friends created interactions where the student retold a story she created, but also extended into the literacy areas of listening and speaking during the little story time session that took place. The creation of this story book is not only evidence

of reading acquisition, but an extension of writing skills, where the child created a pictorial story. Most importantly, the student took control of her learning experience, thus being motivated to create an original story.

The building center offers many opportunities to create many creations out of blocks and other manipulatives. One student during a play session made a great self-discovery that he could build a wagon, bird, and a bike. He was so proud of his creations he made. He had a beaming smile from ear to ear (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 25th, 2014). He was able to create these playfully from following pictorial instructions that came with the building links. He followed the step-by-step instructions and discovered that he could create things on his own. He acquired and deepened his reading acquisition skills during this particular play situation. He self-directed his interest to a building activity that was available and took control, and discovered that he could build many different things. This motivated him to keep building creation after creation.

Halfway into the research study, a breakthrough moment took place during a play session that clearly showed children taking control of their play experience and being highly motivated while playing in a center they had created. The children decided to create their own center other than the centers that were predetermined in the classroom. Observing their actions, I stood back and said nothing, even though they were gathering things like my pointer and teaching tools, things that were off limits to the students. (ex. FUNdation cards, color word cards, sight word cards, vocabulary word cards, etc.). I wanted to sit back and watch what happened. One little boy said, “Look guys, we are making a school center!” with excitement. Several children gathered around the morning meeting bulletin board. The one little boy took the lead as teacher, and lined chairs up for

several students. He began teaching his group of students, reviewing the FUNdation cards, sight word cards, color word cards, and vocabulary word cards. The children all seemed to be enjoying themselves while engaging in pretend play of school, while acquiring reading skills in a playful manner (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 20th, 2014).

Then other students wanted to be the teacher, so the students were problem solving and taking turns, and suddenly small pretend school groups formed. One group was working on FUNdation cards, while other groups worked on color words, sight words, and vocabulary words. They were flashing the cards at each other, practicing letters and sounds, and some students even went and grabbed some books from the library center and began reading books with each other. This was the first time students went to gather some books from the library center. It made me wonder if they only associated books with school-related activities? This was the first time the library center was utilized during the research study. The kids associated pretend school with reading picture books.

Since I know the levels of my students, I observed the higher level students helping my students who need extra reinforcement in their reading skills. The children were having such a fun time, learning and acquiring literacy skills during a playful experience were they got to take control of what they wanted to do which highly motivated the children in their play exploration. The pretend play center continued for the remainder of the play sessions.

Another breakthrough play experience that happened occurred at the Levels of Behavior Bulletin Board one day. The children yet again created another center on their own, which they seem highly motivated playing within together. In my classroom, the

children were taught and work off of Dr. Marvin Marshall's Raise Responsibility Model, which can be read about in his book: *Discipline Without Stress*, or at his website, <http://marvinmarshall.com/>. Rules are not called rules, but are called responsibilities so the children take ownership of their own actions. The model is grounded in government. The children learned about each level of behavior, and they choose the level they wish to be on throughout the day. Level A is anarchy, Level B is Bullying, Level C is Conformity, and Level D is Democracy. The system does not require rewards or punishments. The system is about internal motivation to always do what is right, rather than making wrong decisions. The system is very intricate and detailed, and was taught from the first day of school through literature. Level A was taught with the book: *Miss Nelson is Missing*, Level B: *The Three Little Pigs*, Level C: *The Little Red Hen*, and Level D: *The Hole in the Dike*.

The children are better able to make the connection to the levels of behavior, but what is fascinating about this system is that it is a form of higher level thinking. If a child misbehaves the teacher asks: What level of behavior? The children must place the actions verbally into the correct level. If the child struggles, the teacher assists. If the behavior continues, the teacher has a conference with the student, and coaches the student to elicit their consequence, rather than the teacher issuing the consequence. The children have to higher level think, as to why their behavior is inappropriate and how they should fix their inappropriate behavior and actions.

One day a group of students gathered around the Levels of Behavior Bulletin Board and two students took the lead as teacher. One student acted like me, and the other student like the first grade teacher next door. The other students acted like the students.

Some students were observed staying on Level C or D (which is good), where they were quiet and following directions. Other students were talking and not listening and staying on Level A and B (which are not good choices). The pretend teachers were reading and reviewing the classroom responsibilities (displayed in pictures) and asking their students, “What level of behavior?” The pretend students misbehaving had to stop and think and place their level of behavior, but they were also asked how they could fix the problem. So they had to go a step further and think of a consequence or a way they could make up for their inappropriate behavior. At one point, the group of students who were on Level A and B, made the one teacher call out, “It has to stop! This is the last straw!” The students on Level C or D were commended for staying on those levels (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 21st, 2014).

It was so interesting to see this happen, because they were applying comprehension skills in conjunction with the Levels of Behavior System, and using higher level thinking skills in accordance with their own personal choices. They also used their reading skills while picture reading the classroom responsibilities displayed. They were having fun while acquiring these literacy skills, and they were highly motivated because the center was self-driven and created by the students.

During one play session, a student decided to explore the toy game: Word Stretcher. This game is where a student puts different Velcro letters to a band that will stretch in and out. It helps students understand that words are made of letters with individual sounds when the band is stretched. Then when the band detracts the sounds need to be blended together. The student playing with the game said, “I’m going to be Miss Siderio.” She took the word stretcher and made words such as lip, qap, and lim. She

used me as her student and asked, “You know what this says?” she said. I said, “I do not.” She said, “Yes you do! You know this! You know how to do it!” She then helped me blend the sounds to read the words (teacher researcher journal, Dec 5th, 2014). The student was practicing how to blend CVC words (ex. cat, hat, mop, hop, etc.) where she was acquiring literacy skills and driving her own learning to become fully motivated in her play exploration.

Writing took place in the arts and crafts center which contained materials such as construction paper, glue, scissors, pencils, crayons, jewels, stickers, etc. This center was filled during each play session with about six or more children. This center I feel was always heavily populated because children could really take control and decide what they wanted to explore and play with and create, thus being highly motivated while doing so. Over the course of many play sessions, children were observed writing their letters, numbers, and creating story books using pictures and/or short phrases to accompany the pictures. In kindergarten the main sources of writing at this point in the year early Fall/Winter, the children are experimenting with a combination of drawing, scribble writing, letter-like forms, dictating and some are writing words, phrases and sentences.

One drawing displayed a picture of a person and two words: I, am, and three scribbles. The child dictated to me that it’s me teaching the sight words. A child drew a picture of the principal and me. The picture of me was labeled with the letter: M for Miss Siderio, and the principal was labeled with a letter: D for the title and name of the principal. The children used letters to label the pictures with each person’s name. When the child was asked to explain the drawing, the child explained that it was the principal and I holding hands. We were on our way to a meeting. Another student drew herself in a

purple dress, and her friend in a blue dress holding hands. The student explained to me that the two of them were holding hands, and were best friends. There were many other occasions of many drawings and forms of writing that took place over the course of the study, be these are all examples that students can acquire writing skills in playful ways in a writing center that contains a plethora of writing materials. The children seemed very happy playing and acquiring literacy skills where they chose their own explorations, instead of being told what literacy writing task should be completed.

As the arts and crafts center was full of students writing and crafting, the conversations and multiple exchanges were vibrant and rich, sometimes even comical at times. The kids were joyfully and playfully crafting together while conversing among each other, and I feel that this was due to the freedom of playing and being able to choose topics that they wanted to talk about that were at their age level. It reminded me of being out with friends for a chat over a latte, or working on a project with family and friends where we freely conversed about various topics. As I watched this happen on many occasions, it made me happy to see my students happy and I felt free for them, because they felt free to converse and have fun in a playful way. They were conversing in a conversational way, because they were engaged in play exploration rather than a didactic learning activity, where this made learning so much more rich and effective. Conversations were student driven and not teacher driven, so motivation to be more engaged in conversation took place. This is true during snack time too, where conversations are student driven, age-appropriate and students are more motivated to converse in conversations.

It is clearly evident that self-direction and motivation was a common theme seen throughout the study. Many of their play choices were grounded in classroom functions, rather than creating something new. I feel that is due to a child's desire to take on real-life roles (ex. being a school teacher or a mom). Children enjoy becoming something they may wish to be later in life (ex. school teacher) or think it's exciting to pretend to be an adult and act like they have control over things like adults do, because children are always being directed by a parent or school teacher in their daily lives.

Cooperation, Sharing, Problem Solving

Cooperation, Sharing, and Problem Solving were seen daily. This is an essential part of a kindergartener's social-emotional development at this age, and play gives them the advantage to develop and exercise these social skills that are so necessary for daily life. The children in each center were observed taking turns during hop scotch in the math center or exploring the magnetic kit in the science center, working together to build a house in the building center, creating a picture or piece of art work in the arts and crafts center, preparing a meal or picnic in the kitchen center, working together to create the school center and then sharing the materials in the student created center, etc. Each play session exhibited some type of cooperation and sharing. But of course, at this age problems arise, for example one time someone would not share the food in the kitchen center, or allow someone to play with them, or be the teacher in the school center, etc. These problem situations were sometimes brought to my attention from the students, where I told the students to try and work it out together. If I had to step in and mediate I did, but this was not essential all the time. Most times the children worked out the

problems that arose on their own, but play allowed the children to freely problem solve, which is another life skill children need to develop.

In the arts and crafts center the students enjoyed working together freely as a small group, drawing and writing and making creations of their choice. As they worked, they talked, listened, giggled, and shared. In this center, I observed many mannerly verbal exchanges than in other centers such as, “Can I please have the glue? Can someone hand me the blue marker please?”

Many other conversations each day took place in this center, but here is a short conversation I recorded with multiple exchanges from different students in the center:
Student A: Look at mine Miss Siderio! Do you like it? Me: That’s pretty! Student B: All of yours is totally better! Student C: Can I please have a piece of paper? Student D: Sure!
Student A: Who likes my picture? Everyone: I do! Student E: I messed up! Student A: I’m drawing a picture of me in a dress. I’m trying to fall in love with Luke Bryan. Do you like my rainbow? Me: Yes! Student C: I am making a sorry card. Student A: Look at my dress! This took me a long time. Student C: Guess what? Student E: What? Student C: I’m giving this to you. The exchanges were just so rapid and rich on so many occasions and so many different topics came up in conversation sporadically. Children were learning to listen to each other which is an essential part of getting along with someone (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 5th, 2014).

The children as previously stated in Chapter one, learn phonics skills through a program called: FUNdations. The children each day participate in a drill sounds activity, where there are predetermined letter-keyword-sounds for letters A-Z (some examples are A-apple-/a/, B-bat-/b/, C-cat-/c/, D-dog-/d/, and so forth.) The children repeat these

sounds, and the program believes that these letter-keyword-sounds will help students make the connection of letters to sounds with keywords. They serve as a self-help skill to students as they are acquiring reading and writing skills. During one play session, I observed two students looking at an alphabet poster displayed in my room, and they sat in front of the poster playing a letter-keyword-sound game. The poster had different keywords displayed (in picture form) other than the FUNdations program. But to my surprise, the students were transferring their knowledge of letter and sounds to completely different keywords. Instead of C-cat-/c/, which is a FUNdations letter-keyword sound, and was displayed on the poster, one student said, “C-cactus-/c/”. The students continued to go back and forth thinking of new keywords for the letters and sounds of the alphabet working together in a respectful manner while learning to take turns (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 20th, 2014). This displayed students transferring a skill and drill activity to a form of higher level thinking where the students had to think of other words with the same initial letter and sound. The students were acquiring literacy skills in a playful manner, while cooperating and taking turns.

An activity in the building center among four students required a lot of cooperation because four children worked on a castle house. They were busily working together and told me they were doing teamwork. The students were deciding who would make the roof and door, and they were following instructions from each other (ex. put this first, why don't you make the door, etc.). They were aware that they were working together and did it so beautifully. They playfully enjoyed creating their castle house while they used speaking and listening skills to work together to get a job done (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 5th, 2014).

Imaginative Play

When children were engaged in the various play centers, on many occasions Imaginative Play took place among students both socially and individually. Students enjoyed taking on the role of adults, animals, or make-believe things as they played. When children play, they are able to use their imaginations to explore the world around them.

The dramatic play center had sea animal puppets. There is a turtle, dolphin, orca and lobster. Students used sea animal puppets and changed their voices when they spoke as they pretended to be a turtle or dolphin. Four students were playing with the puppets and these puppets all swam up to me one day and this is the conversation that took place: “How you doin? (says the dolphin) I’m good! (I say) Hi, I’m Mr. Dolphin. I just swim so slow. (says turtle). Hi! (says orca).” I ask the turtle, “How come you are so slow?” The turtle says, “Because I am a turtle.” Then the dolphin responds, “We need to leave for dinner.” The sea animal puppets left (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 13th, 2014). Pretend dialogue not only took place using greetings and introductions, but each puppet had a different voice than the student behind the puppet. These students playfully acquired literacy skills as they played with the puppets in a make-believe way.

The kitchen center was a spot where this happened often, where students took on the roles of moms, dads, sisters, babies, dogs, and cats. Children pretended to play house and take on adult roles and do grown-up tasks such as making dinner, going food shopping, or taking care of a baby. In the kitchen center writing tablets and pencils are there in case students want to take food orders. Students were observed taking orders from other students in other centers or students within the kitchen center in order to

prepare the requested order. This happened on many occasions during all play sessions. Students came up to me on many occasions and asked me what I would like to eat. The way the students wrote the orders were usually a line of scribbles for each item ordered, with the occasional correct spelling from students who knew how to spell some words. Although environmental print ring cards are in the kitchen center (they display a picture of a food with its name), the children never used them to write the names of foods correctly. They used the cards to ask what someone wanted to eat, but they preferred scribbles to take orders. These play interactions were rich in writing, speaking and listening skills as children pretended to be waiters and waitress.

Other pretend play interactions that took place in the kitchen center highlight students using their imaginations while taking on the role of adults. One boy who was the dad was overheard one day while preparing a meal, “It’s 180 degrees in here! It’s lunch! Where’s my phone? Oh, I threw it in the microwave.” I asked him: “How come you threw it in the microwave?” He said, “Because it’s funny!” Later, the boy continued to say as he turned the knobs to the oven: “I’m making it hotter in here. I need to make the soup!” (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 11th, 2014). On another occasion one student who was the mom was cooking food, and she was yelling at the dad. She was shaking her finger and yelling in a high-pitched voice. It was difficult to decipher her speech. Although it was difficult to decipher her speech, the dad’s expression was one that he was in trouble, due to the tone of the little girl’s voice and her body language. He decided to just walk away from the situation. A minor misunderstanding happened between a dad and daughter. This is the conversation that took place, after the daughter had said no to the dad: “What did you say to me? No! If you keep saying that to me, I’m going to throw

it in the trash.” (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 14th, 2014.) One day a group of students created on the rug a huge meal. They laid out all the food and drinks in the kitchen center and told me they were having a feast. I asked where they were at, and they said they were having a picnic in their backyard. They were playing pretend house. They all sat and pretended to eat their feast, and they all conversed about many different things. Two students pretended to be a cat and dog, and one student told the pets not to eat the taco, because it’s been in the closet for 100 years. I observed speech in action, and saw students listening and responding as they playfully had a picnic (teacher researcher journal, Nov. 18th, 2014). The kitchen center each day was very rich in speaking and listening skills where students pretended to take on the roles of adults and animals.

Here are some other brief accounts of when imaginative play took place. The school center and levels of behavior bulletin board were also a place where imagination took soar, because students were pretending to be teachers and pretend students. Even though they knew they were students, they took on the role of a pretend student probably because that is how the imagination works. You can pretend to be something you are but in a different way or aspect. Other students played with horse figures, and decided to become the horse and changed their voices as they spoke and play with the horse figures. One student created a wand in the arts and crafts center and used it to change herself into a fairy. One student used Popsicle sticks from the arts and craft center as antlers to become a reindeer, while another student created butterfly puppets and pretended to be a butterfly as she flew around the room. In the building center a student created a TV frame out of cubes and pretended to watch TV. Other students pretended to be Zombies

and scare each other, while other students pretended to be action figures with the powers in the dramatic play center.

Expression of Feelings

Another major theme was the expression of feelings. Students were observed making sorry cards for each other, or created drawings and writings to give to their friends. I would ask on many occasions, “How come you made that?” Most students would say I made it for my friend because I love my friend, or because I know my friend likes this. I heard students express their feelings verbally to friends both positively and negatively. It depended upon the situation. If the situation was positive a friend could have been complimenting another friend on their creation, but if students were in conflict they were heard expressing their feelings to each other in a less positive manner.

Each play session brought a plethora of created hearts and roses, drawings of a student with me doing a friendly activity, or drawings full of hearts, hearts cut from paper that they decorated, heart colleges, myself and a student surrounded by hearts, roses created from paper, markers, crayons, and popsicle sticks, and many other forms of writing. The students would come up and give me these creations, or say, “Miss Siderio, I made you this.” Then they would place their creation on my desk. I didn’t ask for any explanations. I knew the students were expressing their feelings of love, compassion, and kindness towards me their teacher.

A very touching moment during play one day was when a student decided to make a card for a friend. It was a beautiful experience to see this happen. Earlier in the day this student wasn’t being too friendly to her friend. She was having some trouble getting along with her throughout the day. Not too long before playtime, she was crying

and telling her friend she was sorry and that she really loved her when I had a conference with the both of them. When playtime came the little girl sat down at the arts and crafts center and stated: "I'm making a sorry card." The little girl took about 20-25 minutes to create her sorry card for her friend. She put a lot of thought and effort into the card. On the front of the card it stated who the card went to and who the card was from with the two little girls drawn on the front. On the inside is a large red heart, and written inside it stated, "I Love You." I watched her present the card to her friend, and her friend had a big smile, thanked her and they both hugged (teacher researcher journal, Dec. 4th, 2014). This beautiful example of friendship and forgiveness happened during play, where the child could freely express herself through writing for things she did that she was not very proud about it.

Summary of Data Analysis

As quoted in chapter one, "According to Rousseau (Tracey & Morrow, 2011), children should evolve naturally through their own exploration and curiosity of objects in the world" (p. 24). After looking across my data sources, I found that students did naturally evolve as they explored the objects in the world around them to nurture their own innate curiosity. This is something that the children have always desired to do, because work is the play of a child, and the children finally were given this opportunity. Additionally, students were enjoying a classroom that was teacher guided and rich in play activities. According to Miller (2009), "A kindergarten classroom should be rich in child-initiated play and playful with focused learning, where children are free to explore their world through play with the guidance of teachers." Children did this during the duration of the study while engaging in play. Furthermore, students unknowingly were acquiring

literacy skills in the four areas of literacy acquisition as seen below, through play, which is developmentally age appropriate for this grade and age level. Last, themes emerged from the play sessions. The data suggests that when students are offered with play materials where they can explore freely through play, the play materials and play sessions allow students to develop their acquisition of literacy skills in a more meaningful way, while taking control of their play experiences to become fully motivated, learning social skills, using their imagination, and expressing their feelings freely. Chapter Five presents the conclusions and implications of this study as well as recommendations for further research.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusions, Limitations and Implications for the Field

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than a year of conversation.”

~Plato

Summary of Findings

In concluding my research, I found that students really enjoyed playing socially and independently and that they did acquire literacy skills in many different play situations. After spending 6-7 weeks observing my students for a duration of 25-30 minutes at least three times a week, I found that this study benefited the children by providing them with an instructional strategy that is developmentally age appropriate for this grade level. The children were able to do the work of a child, play, and while they played they socialized, laughed, had fun, cooperated, shared, problem solved, took turns, and acquired literacy skills in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language.

After four weeks, the children became familiar with the different play centers and materials in them. They also became more familiar with the procedures that were expected of them during play (ex. put away a toy before playing with a new toy, clean up when the clean up song came on, etc.). I found that children after the four weeks became more comfortable with their play environment and were more comfortable to explore the materials and deeply engage in their play. By the end of the study, the children became so adapted to playing at the end of the day that it became more and more difficult for them to clean up at the closure of a play session because they were so engaged.

Additionally, the children were acquiring and deeply engaging in literacy skills that are grounded in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Reading Literature, Reading: Informational Text, Reading: Foundational Skills, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. The Introduction for the Kindergarten Standards state (2011):

...Learning to confidently communicate, speak, listen, read and write multifaceted processes that require a wide variety of instructional approaches during a continuum of growth in language from birth through eight years old. Early literacy activities in kindergarten teach children a great deal about reading and writing but not in ways that look like elementary school instruction. (pg. 1)

One instructional strategy is using play to help children acquire literacy skills, and throughout the 6-7 weeks the children were exposed to rich play materials and were involved in literacy rich activities to acquire and deepen their literacy skills.

Furthermore, by the conclusion of the study, the students not only demonstrated that literacy skills can be acquired socially and independently through playful interactions, but they also developed social skills (taking turns, cooperating, sharing, getting along, etc.), and used their imaginations to create their own play experience to be creative and exercise their minds in imaginative ways. The students were also able to express their feelings freely to their friends in both positive and or negative ways (if students were having a conflict), and learn how to join in play or invite others to play. The children most importantly took control of their learning which highly motivated them since they could control their play situations by choice.

Last, the findings of my research suggested that the children were deeply engaged in this type of instructional strategy. There was not any child who did not want to play. All children wanted to join in play, play with their friends or play on their own at times, and explore the play materials and explore how they could create their own play experiences freely.

Conclusions

After reviewing the various literature once more which advocates for play in kindergarten, I found that play is very beneficial in a kindergarten classroom. Kagan, Carroll, Comer, & Scott-Little (2006) express that early childhood begins with the whole child, not the curriculum. This should be the central focus. When classrooms are rich in play they address the five domains of a child's development and learning: physically, socio-emotionally, approaches to learning, language and communication development, and cognition and general knowledge.

Kindergarten is academically driven, and pushes these kids at such a young age to rapidly develop reading and writing skills, as well as develop and apply math skills. I found that my research supported that play is beneficial in a kindergarten classroom as the children played with the various play materials and acquired literacy skills and deepened their cognition and general knowledge through the act of playing, but also addressed the whole child, and nurtured each child's full development reaching a child's physical and socio-emotional needs, as well as allowing the child to choose the best learning approaches that were unique and most effective to him or her. Children were also immersed in rich communication and language skills. All five domains of a child's development were reached through play from the data collected from the study.

In addition, social skills are lacking in kindergarten. According to Russell (2011), who conducted a study to assess how kindergarten has changed since the 1950's, kindergarten is a place where academics take precedence over the development of the child. He refers to kindergarten as a new "academic press" rather than a "garden" of learning. He found that in 1950 3% of kindergarten was academically based, and 31% was developmentally based that focused on the child. Today, he found that in the 2000's 8% of kindergarten is developmentally based, and 83% is academically based. The data from the study made learning in kindergarten through play more developmentally based, rather than academically based, because yet the students were learning as they played, their social skills developed drastically because play among students take cooperation, taking turns, getting along, sharing, communication, problem solving, etc. This was seen in each play session that the children interacted within daily.

Essentially, the examples of play in this study reinforced Rousseau's Unfoldment Theory, a theory that I highly support and believe in as a kindergarten educator. According to Rousseau (Tracey & Morrow, 2011), children should evolve naturally through their own exploration and curiosity of objects in the world. Rousseau didn't believe that children should be forced to learn, but educators should lead them to discover their own learning. This should be accomplished through objects and self-discovery, rather than books and lectures, and from my daily observations during play and the data collected, the children were able to naturally evolve making learning a natural experience rather than a forced experience.

Limitations

A major limitation affecting the study was the available time to conduct the research. The children are instructed in the Core 4: Language Arts Literacy, Math, Science and Social Studies. The curriculum must be followed and completed each day. Although I teach in a full-day kindergarten program, the children begin learning at 8:15 and should essentially keep learning the mandated curriculum until dismissal at 3:02. The children have a 40 minute break for lunch and recess (and most days in the winter due to cold temperatures the children are not able to go outside and play and develop their gross motor skills, but rather sit and watch a short film for 20 minutes), and they have a 40 minute special in either computers, music, art, gym, or library. But as long as the mandated curriculum was completed for the day, the children could engage in play. But some days Science or Social Studies lessons at the end of the day took longer than expected, or a math lesson went longer than expected, and needed to be completed after specials before starting a social science, therefore there was no time for play during that day.

In addition to the time frame being an issue, the duration of play sessions posed a problem. In order for children to be deeply immersed in play, more than 25-30 minutes of play should be allotted. The duration of play sessions should have been at least 60 minutes or more. The first 10 minutes or so, it seemed as if the children were getting warmed up and trying to find a play experience that they wanted to engage in, but then sometimes when I played the clean-up song I felt like some students were just getting started and really becoming immersed in their chosen play activities, and then they had to

clean up. Some really good observations or data could have been recorded and collected at these moments that could have contributed to the study.

Last, the time frame of the research study being only six to seven weeks was also a limitation. The play sessions offered so much rich data in so many different areas of literacy, that I felt like I couldn't catch it all. For the purpose of this study, especially for this age group where the work of these students is play, a longer time span would have been beneficial such as half a year or an entire school year. If the time frame was expanded, I could have possibly been able to gather more rich and detailed data concerning literacy acquisition skills in the four areas of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, with a deeper emphasis on language.

Implications for the Field

Implications for the field to be considered are a longer duration of time, parent input about school practices and play, a deeper look into language acquisition and an exploration into how mandated curriculum lessons can be turned into playful experiences.

The duration of play sessions lasted from 25-30 minutes and these deemed to be too short in order to have the students be deeply immersed in their play experiences and collect enough rich and detailed data across the field of literacy acquisition. Longer periods of play might offer richer and deeper play experiences for the children and provide more vivid and rich observations and data to collect to further explore how learning through play helps children acquire literacy skills.

Parent input in future studies might also contribute to the field in order to assess parent views on the current state standards, curriculum requirements, and opportunity to learn through play. Interviews or surveys could be conducted to assess parent views on a

playful creative curriculum versus scripted, didactic curriculum. Parents could also give valuable information about their child's play at home, and discuss how they feel play impacts their child. These findings could add to the study and help the teacher researcher have a different view about play and literacy skills.

There was not enough time to fully dive deep and gather and interpret data that was directly linked to the Kindergarten Language Standards. But further studies that are longer in duration could explore how children acquire language skills through play. The teacher researcher can look at the rich vocabulary, words, and concepts that come up during student discussions during play. The teacher researcher could observe and record how students utilize verbs, nouns, plural nouns, questions, prepositions, and complex sentence structure among speech during play to further explain how learning through play can assist in language development.

Last, future teacher researchers could explore how lessons from mandated Language Arts Literacy curriculum could be made into playful lessons, where the students learn skills and concepts mandated in the teaching manual through play. Various lessons would still meet lesson objectives and standards to acquire literacy skills and concepts, but the study could assess how these literacy skills and concepts could be made into playful lessons, if playtime is not implemented as part of the daily curriculum.

In summary, implementing play in the kindergarten classrooms can help students acquire and deepen literacy skills socially among peers and also through self-discovery. This study suggests that kindergarten teachers should plan and implement play instruction to provide students with learning experiences that are meaningful and most effective to this age and grade level. It is the role of the teacher, while challenging among

the changing curriculum, assessments, and state and district demands, to provide kindergarten students with these playful, hands-on experiences. By implementing play in the kindergarten classroom students at this age will be able to naturally develop through playful learning experiences to acquire literacy skills. Kindergarten teachers can use their knowledge and expertise to help teach the whole child in a developmentally appropriate way. Kindergarten teachers need to read between the play lines in order to understand that kindergarten students can acquire literacy skills through play.

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Appendix

Pictures of Student Work Samples and Artifacts



