

**The Importance of Play in kindergarten Classrooms:
An Exploratory Study**

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Abstract:

The study aimed to discover the benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten, how play affects students' academic performance, the effect of play on educational goals in inclusive settings, and the relation between children's play and emotional literacy. The study used a qualitative method design including direct observations, anecdotal notes, and examining, using, and making records and semi-structured interviews. The participants were students from a low-income, rural Central Illinois school district. The sample of the study consisted of twenty-five kindergarten students and two kindergarten classes for the first semester 2022-2023, as well as, twenty teachers were selected based on their interest in being interviewed. Data was collected through direct observations, field notes, records and closed-ended questions. The results of this study revealed that children who play in kindergarten are more likely to do better academically in school than children who did not play in kindergarten. Therefore, the study illustrated the many positive effects of incorporating play in kindergarten classrooms. Which is improving children's cognitive, physical, and emotional well-being. Recommended actions from this study included sharing the results with administrators and teachers, implementing play in kindergarten classrooms, and continuing learning about play in school settings.

Keywords: Play in Kindergarten; Academic performance; Emotional literacy; Play-Based Learning ; Academic Play.

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أهمية اللعب في الفصول الدراسية لرياض الأطفال: دراسة إستكشافية

هدفت الدراسة إلى اكتشاف فوائد دمج اللعب في رياض الاطفال، وكيف يؤثر اللعب على الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب، وتأثير اللعب على الأهداف التعليمية في البيئات الشاملة، والعلاقة بين لعب الأطفال والمعرفة العاطفية. واستخدمت الدراسة تصميم اسلوب نوعي بما في ذلك الملاحظات المباشرة والملاحظات القصصية والعلامات وفحص السجلات واستخدامها وعملها والمقابلات. كان المشاركون طلابا من منطقة المدارس الريفية في وسط الينوي ذات الدخل المنخفض. تكونت عينة الدراسة من ٢٥ طالبا من طلاب رياض الاطفال وصفي روضة للفصل الدراسي الأول لعام ٢٠٢٢-٢٠٢٣. بالإضافة الى ذلك قام الباحثون باختيار ٢٠ معلمة حيث تم مقابلة اللواتي رغبين في المشاركة من صف الروضة للخامس. تم جمع الملاحظات المباشرة والملاحظات الميدانية والسجلات وأسئلة مقابلة مغلقة. وكشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الأطفال الذين يلعبون في رياض الأطفال أداءهم الأكاديمي أفضل في المدرسة من الأطفال الذين لم يلعبوا في رياض الأطفال. وأوضحت الدراسة الآثار الإيجابية العديدة لدمج اللعب في الفصول الدراسية لرياض الأطفال. ووجدت الدراسة أن اللعب يحسن صحة الاطفال المعرفية والجسمية والانفعالية. وشملت الاجراءات الموصى بها من هذه الدراسة لمشاركة النتائج الحالية مع المدرء والمعلمين لمواصلة التعلم القائم على اللعب في بيئة المدرسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللعب في الروضة، الانجاز أو الأداء الأكاديمي، المعرفة

العاطفية، التعلم القائم على اللعب، اللعب الأكاديمي.

Introduction:

Play is a crucial part of a child's life. Margatthe Schurz founded the first kindergarten in the United States of America, but it was Friedrich Froebel who first founded it in Germany. The Froebel Trust states that Froebel who is the inventor of kindergarten and the pioneer of early childhood (1782-1852) believed that play is the principal means of learning in early childhood. "In the play, children construct their understanding of the world through direct experience with it, through and in his play he is able to feel himself to be independent and autonomous". (Froebel in Liebschner 1992:69). The influence of play significantly impacts a kindergartener. Miller and Almon (2009) stated that play is an essential event in a child's life, defended by the American Academy of Pediatric (2018). They published a significant clinical report concluding that play is essential for growth. Furthermore, play promotes children's creativity and helps them become more imaginative, flexible, physically, cognitively, and emotionally strong. As well as play helps in developing a healthy brain (Dominey, 2021). From a very young age, children engage and interact with their environment through play (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010).

According to Miller and Almon, (2009) they stated that "play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that enhance their confidence and resiliency to face future challenges" (Miller, Almon, 2009:19). The benefits of play outnumber the problems of including play in a school setting. Play is controversial because some believe it takes away time from academics.

Significant trends in literacy revealed that incorporating play in kindergarten classrooms has extensive benefits for students. Play has a positive impact on a student's brain development. It also creates children who can regulate their emotions and actions in social settings (Parrott & Cohen, 2020).

Research Problem and Questions

A concern in education is that kindergarten students need more play time during school. Academics have been the push of kindergarten classrooms, leaving less room for play. According to Alvarez (2015), no research shows that mastering academic skills like word decoding in kindergarten has any better academic performance than children who do it in first grade. Across the United States, academic standards have been the focus of the classroom. Teachers are pressured by the administration to hit content standards in each lesson taught. So, a problem observed across America is that schools need to place more on academics over play. The National Education Association (2018) reports that play rapidly disappeared from kindergarten and early education. The lack of play in schools affects negatively children's academic performance and emotional literacy.

The American Academy of pediatrics (2007) states that play allows children to develop all aspects of comprehensive and integrated growth (physical, cognitive, emotional development) and helps develop creativity and broad imagination. Children learn to be a part of society and the world through play. Therefore, since play is integral to child development, teachers and schools must incorporate play in kindergarten classrooms.

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten?
- 2- How does incorporating play affect students' academic performance?
- 3- How do academic goals affect play implementation in inclusive settings?
- 4- What is the relation between children's play and emotional literacy?

This study is significant for educators and children. It helps educators by revealing whether or not play should be included in the kindergarten curriculum. It also benefits educators by determining what impact play can have on students, socially and academically. In addition, this study helps children because it determines whether or not they should receive play in school. It decides if they are receiving

the best possible education. In conclusion, this study benefits all individuals in a school setting because it explains various aspects of play in kindergarten classrooms.

Review of Related Literature:

Early childhood education provides a foundation for a child's learning and development. Kindergarten is one of the early classes in early childhood education. A kindergarten program typically includes children ages 5-6 years old. Zoromski (2019) suggests that the word kindergarten comes from German, where "kinder" means children and "garten" means garden. The man who coined the word kindergarten is Friedrich Froebel. He started the first kindergarten in 1840. Froebel symbolized his goal and vision for early childhood through these words, children are like small flowers. They are different and need caring, although each child is a wonderful when seen in the context of their peers (Zoromski, 2019).

Froebel believed that children needed to be loved and cared for like flowers in a garden.

Kindergarten is proposed be an environment where children can grow and learn on their own through self-directed play while obtaining teacher guidance.

There is an issue with Froebel's vision. The problem lies in kindergarten no longer being what it was intended to be. Kindergarten is no longer about learning through play. The problem is that kindergarten students need more time to play in the general education classroom. Play is vital for child development. This related literature review focused on the benefits and disadvantages of play in kindergarten and the impact and relations of play on various aspects of a child's life. In addition, the review examined the similarities and differences between research studies on kindergarten play and the approaches to kindergarten learning.

What is Play?

Play in kindergarten is attributed to different categories. For example, ' the Montessori approach (1897) emphasizes that there is physical, stirring, nature, music and art, and age-appropriate play. These types of play are meant to support learning opportunities as children develop cognitive, language, social, motor, and emotional

abilities. Play is essential during early childhood education because it helps support children's development (Ebisujima, 2013). During early childhood education, play is used as a form of learning.

Smolucha and Smolucha (2022) explained that any play activity can be used to clarify ambiguous educational concepts. The reasoning behind play being able to fulfill the notion of being the highest level of early childhood development is that play helps children develop abstract thinking, and requires self-control to role play.

Additionally, "Vygotsky 1932 had formulated a theory of creativity as the development of imagination and analytical thinking as consciously directed higher mental functions. All higher functions originate in guided pretend play using object substitutions and the accompanying internalization of speech" (Cited in Smolucha & Smolucha, 2022: 1049). This higher mental function will serve as a benefit to why we need kindergarten play. So, from play, a child executes higher functions of internal workings to think abstractly and thereby learn. Vygotsky theory was coined that play is the highest form of preschool development (Bodrova & Leong 2015).

Stages of Play

There are a wide range of types of play. An important note to remember is that children go through stages of play at their own pace (Parten theory, 1929). Rymanowicz (2021) describes Parten's six stages in a development way. The first stage of play is unoccupied play. This is where play looks scattered. For example, unoccupied play might look like exploring toys without organization in babies and children. Next, there is solitary play. It occurs when children entertain themselves without interact with their peers. According to Rymanowicz (2021), solitary play helps children master new personal skills due to being able to explore freely. Then, there is onlooker play during early childhood. During onlooker play, children engagingly watch other children play. The active portion of onlookers is watching others play. Watching other children play teaches the onlookers about social rules of play, relationships, and ways to use and play with materials. Following onlooker play is parallel play. During parallel play, children play next to each other but do not necessarily interact

with one another. This stage of play is like a warm-up exercise. The children are not playing together; instead, they are practicing the skills needed to play together. An example of how this might look in an early childhood classroom is children making cars drive next to each other on the carpet. Parallel play helps children prepare for the next play stages as they age.

A shift in early childhood play occurs during the associative play stage. This is when children are excited in playing with other children. Associative play helps children practice what was learned during the onlooker and parallel play stages. Children can utilize their social skills to engage with other children during an activity. Finally, cooperative play is the most famous type of play observed in an early childhood classroom. A teacher's role is vital in cooperative play. Children can cooperate by following rules. Sometimes, cooperative play involves much conflict. Rymanowicz (2021) suggests that conflict is normal during this stage. A teacher can support students engaging in cooperative play by staying close and helping them learn how to solve problems and express their emotions appropriately.

To support children through the stages of play, adults should set the scene to create opportunities for children to explore and learn. This can look like rotating materials in a classroom to continue discovering new materials to play with. Also, adults should make prompting cues to help children learn how to behave appropriately during play.

Benefits of Kindergarten Play

The benefits of kindergarten play are extensive. Play should be viewed as a valuable experience in kindergarten classrooms. Research shows that “play permits development in the prefrontal cortex” (Lynch, 2015: 348). The prefrontal cortex of the brain is responsible for the decision-making processes. It is responsible for a kindergartener's ability to plan and think about the consequences of events, solve problems, and control emotions. Play helps the brain in many ways, such as language development, social interactions, emotional regulation, and academic success.

One of the benefits of this is that playing with peers can help them acquire skills and experiences needed in adulthood. Another benefit of

play is that it helps children learn how to cooperate with others. These social skills in young children will carry over for many years. Expanding on the skill of communication, research shows that allowing children to play in a classroom will enable them to develop oral language skills in a natural and safe environment (Pang & Simoncelli-Bulak, 2017: 23). Oral language is how individuals express ideas, feelings, and knowledge. Play helps us learn how to do this because, through play, children are forced to use their oral language to communicate with their classmates naturally.

Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) suggest that vocabulary development takes place in practicing and playing activities. These activities incorporate students and teachers as members in different roles. When playing roles out, children encounter different scenarios where communication is required. For example, communication is required in play activities such as a doctor with a patient, a bus driver with a passenger, or a shopkeeper with a client. The need for new and appropriate words frequently develops in playing out these scenarios. Bruner (1983) clarified that new words are usually learned to regulate joint activity better. This is what happens with regard to vocabulary development during Education process. In conclusion, words are developed in a play-based kindergarten classroom to communicate and regulate an activity. Data has been collected in Van Oer's study (2013) that proves that children use words in their interactions with their peers when playing.

Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020) argue on the importance of play which allows children to learn naturally in a variety of experiences, instead of focusing solely on academic rigor. Some researchers also explain how play can be used to close achievement gaps in children three to six. Play helps to close achievement gaps, especially those in disadvantaged communities. Teachers need to incorporate play into their schedules because it allows for their students to grow interactive skills, create higher-level vocabulary, and understand their worlds well and in meaningful ways. Another benefit of play is that it benefits emotional development. Research has established that "play facilitates children's development of coping strategies and contributes

to their emotional understandings. The emotional health, social skills, and cognitive-linguistic capabilities that emerge in the early years predict successful school outcomes” (Kirk & Jay, 2018, p.474). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2018) found that play promotes the skill of executive functioning in children. This is a positive aspect for early childhood students in kindergarten because executive functioning balances impulsiveness, emotionality, and aggression. So, play becomes vital in regulating a child’s body dress response. Therefore, play is an effective antidote to helping impulsivity and aggression. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2018) also suggests that play leads to molecular, cellular, and behavioral changes that promote learning and prosocial behavior. Play even activates neurons in the brain that promote the relief of stress. These are all positive impacts that play can have on a kindergartener’s brain development.

Guirguis- Blake et al. (2018) stated that play is a foundation for developing oral language skills that children use to develop reading skills. Through the power of play, literacy development is stimulated in children. Literacy development is stimulated through dramatic play, games, stories, and language experiences. The literacy skills that can be developed through these play activities are print concepts, alphabet skills, and early literacy skills. A classroom example of how early literacy concepts can be developed through play in kindergarten is through the play activity of role-playing as a teacher. A kindergarten student would imitate their teacher by reading a book to their peers. This type of play would develop students' early concepts of print and exploratory reading strategies. Thus, this illustrates a positive correlation between reading and play in kindergarten classrooms.

Social development is a driving force behind kindergarten play. A positive relationship between play and social development is present because students learn to interact with each other in an appropriate social context during play. Guirguis-Blake.et al. (2018) explained that peer play interactions are related to children’s prosocial behavior. Five different social factors are positively impacted by play. These include the teacher-student relationship’s closeness, the teacher-child interaction's emotional tone, observed social pretend play, and

positive peer interaction. Research has shown that pretend play positively affects a child's prosocial behavior. What does social development have to do with academics? Social development is a critical aspect of oral development for children. If a child does not have positive social development, they risk the development of oral language skills. Therefore, play is a benefit to social development for all children.

Disadvantages of Kindergarten Play

Although there are many benefits to incorporating play in a kindergarten classroom, research has found few disadvantages. People equate academic preparation with explicit instruction. This means that when children play in a classroom, others believe they are not learning. "Parental pressures (Fung & Cheng, 2012) and demands from colleagues teaching in the upper grades (Baker, 2014; Leggett & Ford, 2013) to prepare students for later grades implicitly suggest a dichotomous stakeholder perception between play and learning" (Pyle et al., 2020 : 57). Some believe that play does not allow students to master curricular standards, but research does not support that.

Research suggests that a play-based learning environment in kindergarten poses issues for the classroom teacher. Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid (2019) have described teachers' play-based learning issues in six categories. These categories include 1) teacher education and qualifications, 2) parental beliefs and attitudes, 3) policy requires and curricular concerns, 4) peer pressure, 5) structural challenges, and 6) children's characteristics. These categories represent disadvantages to allowing play in a kindergarten classroom.

Early learning outcomes and school preparedness are focused on heavily, so play gets in the way of this. There is a common objection as being play without objectives and thus not serving academic children performance (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). As teachers in Lynch's (2015, 358) ethnography from the Canadian context note, it is 'instructions from the system' and 'teaching to certain standards' that leave no time for play, daily music and movement activities, or even snack time" (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 788). Curricular pressure

significantly impacts play because academics are seen as superior to play.

In addition, parental attitudes and beliefs also disadvantage allowing play in kindergarten classrooms. Research suggests that teachers describe parents as being focused on school achievement and school readiness from early on. Some parents believe that children should be engaging in direct instruction and homework instead of playing in kindergarten (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, structural challenges are seen as a problem in implementing play in kindergarten classrooms. According to Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid (2019), time is the most significant structural challenge. Time is a factor in implementing play in the classroom. Play seems to get in the way of learning and vice versa. Even snack time in early childhood classrooms has been seen as a time thief. A structural challenge many teachers face is large class sizes and understaffing. Free play or play-based learning is more difficult with many students and less help. In addition, funding is a structural disadvantage to implementing kindergarten play. Materials, activities, and toys cost money. Some schools do not prioritize the need for play-based learning in a financial sense.

Finally, regarding play-based learning and teachers, children's characteristics disadvantage implementing play in a kindergarten classroom. Occasionally, children's variable ability to play is an issue for teachers. They question what to do with students when they do not know how to play. Another concept that has been reported is that teachers are unable to identify students with learning disabilities because there is a lack of reading, writing, or assessment of skills during play-based learning.

Relations of Play

Play provides a relationship with different components of a child's early childhood. Play relates to children and youth's academic, social, and emotional well-being (Ginsburg, 2007). As mentioned, play extensively impacts various parts of a child's life. Playing with other children has developed the skills of negotiation, problem-solving, sharing, and cooperation within groups (Anderson-McNamee et al., 2010). These skills help children discover the world around

them. Through this kindergarten play, children can master skills at their own pace, impacting their academic goals. A review of existing research has shown that play is essential when adjusting to a school environment. It improves children's learning readiness by allowing them to learn new subjects and topics without fearing failure (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010).

Play and emotion regulation have a close relationship in kindergarten. Emotion regulation is regulating one's emotions appropriately within a daily environment. It is developed during early childhood. For a child, this would look like internal self-regulation and cultural display rules, meaning when and how emotional behaviors are expressed. Play is crucial in helping a child establish emotional regulation. Specifically, pretend play helps children act out emotional experiences, which builds emotion regulation skills by letting children create and change emotional events. Gayler and Evans (2001) concluded from their research study that pretend play enhances children's ability to control emotions. In their study, children were assessed for emotional regulation and observed while engaging in pretend play (Hoffman & Russ, 2012). Therefore, the relationship between play and emotional regulation goes hand in hand. It is a positive relationship that illustrates that children who partake in imaginative play tend to be better able to self-regulate and control their emotions.

Play- Based Learning

A play-based kindergarten is centered around a curriculum that allows children to learn through play. In a play-based curriculum, children can have choices. They choose what activities they would like to participate in based on their current interests. Some examples of learning activities in a play-based curriculum include creative arts, literacy, numeracy, social studies, science, and more. These learning activities all include play in them. The activities are intended to support the development of concepts, language, communication, and even concentration. Through the development of skills, children learn through play. Furthermore, children are the ones to initiate learning while teachers support it. There is value in learning through a play-

based kindergarten. O’Leary (20¹¹) explained that children learn well through direct experiences- play motivates, stimulates and develop various social skills, and language improvement. During play, children use all five senses, must transport their thoughts and emotions and connect what they already learn with new knowledge.

These positive side effects of play are the driving force of a play-based curriculum. Not only do students learn new knowledge and skills through a play-based curriculum, but they also are learning social, emotional, and life skills.

Extensive research has been conducted on play-based kindergarten. It has been found that teaching a play-based curriculum will take longer for the teacher to learn. An example of a teacher’s role in a play-based kindergarten would be to choose a theme that is then demonstrated through activities (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). For example, a teacher could include a post office in their classroom, and then the students would adopt and practice the sociocultural roles that would come with a post office. The significance of play like this in a kindergarten classroom is that students have choices and are learning through imaginative play.

Types of Play-Based Learning

There are several types of play-based learning scenarios in kindergarten classrooms. Some examples of play-based types found in kindergarten include open-ended, modeled, and purposefully framed play. Cutter-Mackenzie Edwards (2013) has identified these types of play as sustainable in education. Unrestricted play in early childhood education includes play experiences where children are provided with materials. Children are to examine and explore materials to learn about the concept. A teacher does not direct during open-ended play. Instead, a teacher provides children with materials about a concept.

Modeled play in school would include a little more teacher direction. In the modeled play, a teacher demonstrates the suggested use of materials prior to children using the materials. During this kind of play, there is minimal adult interaction between the child and the adult.

Lastly, purposefully framed play is a mixture of unrestricted and modeled play. Children use materials that suggest a sustainability

concept in the purposefully framed play. This type of play-based learning allows for open-ended play and modeled play by the teacher.

Although the extent is unknown, the research study suggests that teachers are more likely to identify concepts and strategies for modeled and purposefully framed play. This demonstrates that each play type might prompt different levels of concept and pedagogical strategies from teachers(Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). To sum it up, a few examples of the types of play-based learning that can be seen in an early childhood classroom include open-ended play (unrestricted), modeled play, and purposefully framed play.

Academic - Based Curriculum

A skills-based or academic-based curriculum is the opposite of a play-based curriculum. A skills-based kindergarten classroom focuses on academic standards through didactic ways of teaching. A didactic teaching style centers on the teachers teaching students without play. Teachers deliver the lessons, and students are to receive them. This is the opposite of play-based; as previously mentioned, a play-based kindergarten is centered on students constructing their learning. Academic-based kindergarten classrooms have disadvantages for the students. According to Longhine (2022), when schools teach these kinds of skills based on academic standards, they no longer indicate that children have these more excellent skills of interest and determination and language, and all the things that children were gaining along the way with the interactions they had in their environment.

Through an academic-based curriculum, there is an emphasis on common core standards. The push of academics through an academic-based kindergarten classroom produces long-term harm for students. Miller and Almon (2009) explain that kindergarteners are under pressure to meet expectations inappropriate for their age. Experts believe that the pressure and push for teachers is increasing and raising the aggression and anger behaviors in young children. Given the high rates of psychiatric disorders among children today, it is critically important that early education practices encourage emotional and physical health, which helps in not worsening illness.

Unfortunately, students in an academic-based kindergarten are at risk of having behavior problems. In a play-based kindergarten classroom, students can practice emotional literacy and self-regulation in an exploratory way.

In addition, an academic or skills-based kindergarten classroom provides disadvantages for students and teachers. Assessments and standardized testing provide teachers with information. A Crisis in Kindergarten reported by Miller & Almon (2009) that testing children under eight is unreliable for evaluating individual children. The information gathered from testing students is unreliable for teachers to make instructional decisions. The same journal also cites that teachers spend over twenty to thirty minutes daily preparing kindergarten students to take standardized tests. A sample of 254 New York City and Los Angeles kindergarten teachers found that most of the teachers in the study spent two to three hours each day focusing on literacy, math, and test preparation. According to the sample, children have thirty minutes or less to play or partake in free-choice activities. Therefore, teachers are harmfully affected by not incorporating play in kindergarten because they focus more on academic assessment and performance. This focus causes unreliable information about students and loss of valuable time in a school day.

Methodology

The research study concerning kindergarten play used a qualitative data collection technique which included direct observations, field notes, and examining, using, and making records as well as interviewing the teachers to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014; Gibbs, 2017). This study examined the benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten, how play affects students' academic performance, the effect of play on educational goals in inclusive settings, and the relation between children's play and emotional literacy. Several relevant data collection techniques were utilized to collect data. These techniques made the most sense in kindergarten because they rely on the teacher and do not require extensive preparation or time. The researchers observed the students and the effect of play on them in the classroom. This was helpful when researching the relationship between children's play, emotional

literacy, and academic goals affecting play implementation in inclusive settings. Field notes were another relevant data collection source utilized for this study. Anecdotal notes were a large part of the data collection because they show how play affects kindergarten students. Through these field notes, a journal was kept, which records the children in their classroom through teachers' observations and reflections on their teaching over time (Mills, 2018). The journal captured what was happening in the classroom. Finally, this study utilized students' records, such as discipline referrals, disaggregated data, and standardized test scores.

Context

The school where the study took place includes grades preschool through fifth grade. It is a low-income. The participants came from a school district in central Illinois. The district is a part of the public school system. It houses elementary, junior, and high schools in the same building. The school district's student population is approximately 575 students in grades PK-fifth grade. There is a student-teacher ratio of 13 to 1. According to the Illinois Report Card (2022), the population of the students where the study took place includes 46% of students labeled as low-income. The report card also states that 26% of students have an Individualized Education Plan.

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 25 kindergarten students (10 males, 15 females) and two kindergarten classes who were selected via convenience sampling (see table 1). The sample also contained a total of 20 teachers who taught grades K–5, noting that they were selected based on their interest in being interviewed. Table 1 represents the demographics of the students and teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1: Kindergarten students’ and teachers’ demographic characteristics

Category	Frequency	Percentages
Child Gender		
Male	10	40
Female	15	60
Total	25	100
Child Age		
5 years old	13	52
6 years old	12	48
Total	25	100
School Exposure		
Attended preschool	15	60
Attended daycare	5	20
No prior exposure	5	20
Total	25	100
Teacher’s experience		
0 to 5 years	5	25
5 to 10 years	5	25
10 years and more	10	50
Total	20	100

Validity of the Research

For face validity, ten of the faculty members in educational sciences college of Yarmouk university and Illinois state university assessed the observation checklist scale and the interview’s questions. The researchers got the feedback from them and made the changes as suggested by the reviewers and some items were deleted as required. In addition, the validity of this study was established through Guba’s Criteria of qualitative research. For example, the researchers employed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. By actively participating in the study, the researchers ensured the study's credibility. The study observations were consistent, comprehensive, and persistent. In order to establish transferability, the researchers developed detailed descriptions of data and the description of the contexts. Also, data was triangulated while collecting data from various sources and methods to establish dependability and confirmability.

Limitations

The study was limited to one school district and two kindergarten classrooms . The study's outcomes could also be limited because it is specific to a particular group of students and teachers. Also, limitations to this data are that other factors outside of play could have impacted these findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers obtained approval for this study from the University's Institutional Review Board, the district's administrator, and the school superintendent. For assuring the confidentiality, the researchers did not include the names of teachers and children who were participated in this study. The researchers collected four weeks of observations in one school. In addition, the researchers received approval for the kindergarten classrooms observations from the district (Ministry of Education). Also, teachers' and children's parents' consent were obtained. After that, two kindergarten classroom were observed at a rate of 40 minutes ($n = 25$ child observations). The teacher and students were observed for four weeks. Thus, the number of observation days that were recorded for discovering the benefits of incorporating play in a kindergarten classrooms was 30 days. The researchers also observed children's play at five- minute breaks. Coding any child' behavior even it's a negative one, and all language behaviors. To assure the internal reliability between observers. All observers practiced coding during the breaks, observing the same children and comparing data until there were done. In order to analyze qualitative data, the researchers began by identifying themes. This helped in identifying patterns or key phrases that emerged. The researchers also asked critical questions, which helped extend their understanding of the problem and its context. In addition, a concept map was utilized to make sense of the data. It helped show the relationships between the influences on kindergarten play.

Results

Kindergarten play has been researched for many years in education. This study aimed to determine if play should be

incorporated into kindergarten classrooms. In Addition, how play affects students' academic performance, the effect of play on educational goals in inclusive settings, and the relation between children's play and emotional literacy.

For analysis the first research question "what are the benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten?", the observation checklist was utilized and the observed benefits of kindergarten play were coded. To answer the second question "how does incorporating play affect students' academic performance? The grades of the students calculated both before and after the study, and comparisons were made in between. In addition, for addressing the third research question," How do academic goals affect play implementation in inclusive settings?" The interview transcription, interview familiarization, themes identification, audio recording, and data coding were all employed. To answer the fourth research question, "What is the relation between children's play and emotional literacy?" It was based on the reports made by the children in the two kindergarten classrooms at the end of the school day regarding their emotional status.

RQ1: What are the benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten?

At the end of the data collection, observations illustrated several benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten classrooms. Observed benefits of kindergarten play include enhanced student focus during instruction, communication skills (using words to problem solve), conflict resolution skills, and student engagement during play. These benefits were observed in a 30-day time frame. Many of the benefits were observed among almost all students. The one benefit that was observed with a smaller number of students was conflict resolution skills. Communication skills and student engagement during play were observed among all 25 participants. Then, enhanced student focus during instruction was observed, with 20 students out of the 30 days. 3 of the 4 benefits were observed each day of the research conduction. Conflict resolution skills were evident in 16 participants out of the 30 days. Overall, there were observable benefits to incorporating play in a kindergarten classroom (see Table 2).

Table 2: Benefits of Incorporating Play in a Kindergarten Classrooms

Benefit	How many days it was observed (out of 30)	How many students it was observed with (out of 25)
Enhanced student focus during instruction	30	20
Communication skills (using words to problem solve)	30	25
Conflict resolution skills	30	16
Student engagement during play	30	25

RQ2: How does incorporating play affect kindergarten students’ academic performance?

During this study, play was incorporated into learning in the kindergarten classrooms. Students’ grades at the end of the study were compared to students’ grades prior to the study. Figure 1 displays in percentages how students’ grades were impacted when there was play in the kindergarten classroom. Approximately, 85% of students’ grades improved, 10% of students’ grades remained the same, and only 5% of students’ grades declined. Therefore, it illustrates that implementing play in a kindergarten classroom positively affects students' academic performance (see Figure 1).

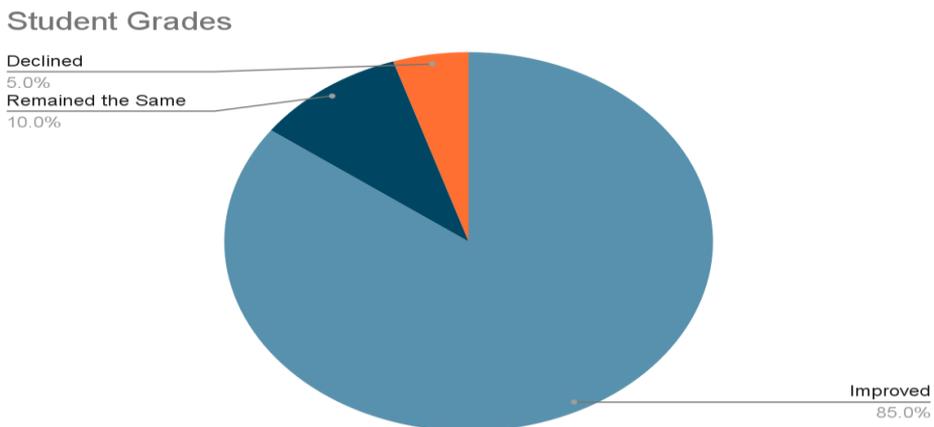


Figure 1: Students’ Grades Percentages

RQ3: How do academic goals affect the implementation of play in inclusive settings?

Twenty teachers (k-fifth grade) were asked to choose one statement that best represents how academic goals influence play in their inclusive classrooms. Five teachers reported that academic goals in kindergarten classrooms have little impact on implementing play in inclusive settings. Other grade-level, five teachers reported that academic goals motivate them to include play in their inclusive classrooms. However, ten teachers with experience of 5 to 10 years (50%) from elementary grades reported that the stress of academics, standards, and time forces them to not include play in their classrooms. So, academic goals negatively influence play implementation in inclusive settings. This illustrates that academic goals negatively affect play implementation in elementary classrooms, whereas kindergarten classrooms are unaffected (see Table 3).

Table 3: Teachers reported on Academic Goals and Play

Interview Statements: Frequency	Years of Exp.	Ratings
Academic goals force me to not include play in my inclusive classroom. 50%	5-10	10
Academic goals motivate me to include play in my inclusive classroom. 25%	10 above	5
Academic goals have no influence on my inclusion of play in my inclusive 25% classroom.	0 -5	5

RQ 4: What is the relation between children’s play and emotional literacy?

During this study, two kindergarten classrooms implemented play as a daily routine. Every day, children would report their emotional status at the end of the school day. The green zone represents children feeling focused and happy. The red zone represents children who were not focused and unhappy. Figure 2 demonstrates that out of the 30 days 19 days, most kindergarten class 1 reported being in the green zone. Only 11 days, most kindergarten class 1 reported being in the red zone at the end of the school day. In addition, kindergarten class 2 reported being in the green zone more than the red zone during this study. This data suggests that students’ emotional literacy was positively impacted when play was in their daily schedule at school (see Figure 2).

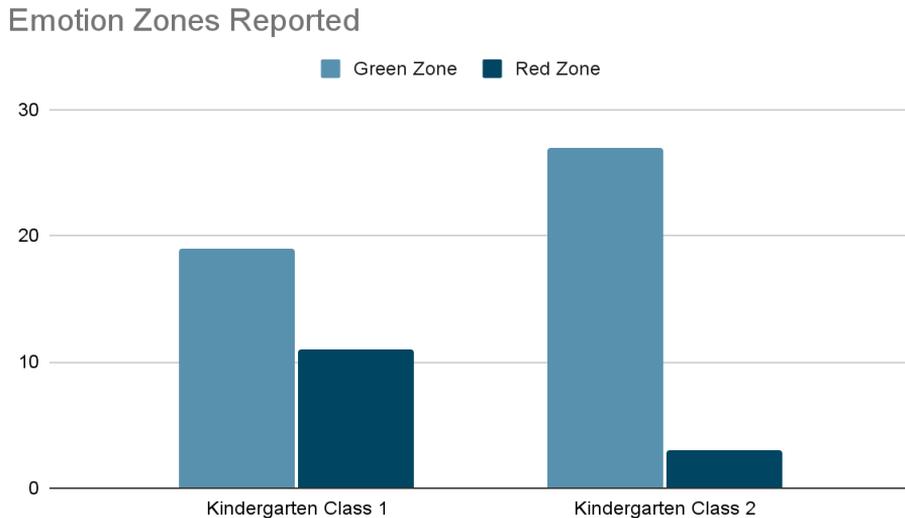


Figure 2: Emotion Zones Reported

Discussion

The purpose of the study was also to determine the effects of play and the impact that play have on academics and emotional literacy. Many of the findings in this study supported points included in the literature review. These results are vital in education because they determine a child's experience of play in kindergarten. Based on previously mentioned research included in the literature and this study, there are many positive impacts of including play in kindergarten classrooms. The first research question studied was: What are the benefits of incorporating play in kindergarten? The results of the study proved that the benefits of kindergarten play include enhanced student focus during instruction, communication skills (using words to problem solve), conflict resolution skills, and student engagement during play. This may be attributed to the fact that play allows children to release the stress of schools and motivate them for instruction which enhance different social skills and abilities. These results support previous findings discussed in the literature. For example, student focus was enhanced when play was

included in the kindergarten classroom. This supports the literature findings that “children pay more attention to class lessons after free play at recess than they do after physical education programs, which are more structured” (The American Pediatrics, 2018: 7).

Students were also observed using their words during interactions and solving problems during play. This observation supports the notion that play promotes communication skills in children. Previous research suggested that allowing children to play in a classroom allows them to develop oral language skills in a natural and safe environment (Pang & Simoncelli-Bulak, 2017: 23). In addition, student engagement during play was visible 100% of the time. These findings are significant because play is a learning mode for young children. As previously mentioned in the literature, play allows children to construct and expand their knowledge and connect with prior experiences, helping them learn new knowledge (Pang & Simoncelli-Bulak, 2017: 26). So, a trend throughout the research study was that play provides extensive benefits in kindergarten classrooms. These include enhanced focus during instruction, communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and student engagement during play.

When Almon (2004) reported that research has shown a direct link between play and the development of mathematical skills, the researchers found this evident after implementing play in the kindergarten classroom. Guirguis-Blake et al. (2018) stated that play is a foundation for developing oral language skills that children use to develop reading skills. This was also mentioned and true in this study. These two notions proved evident because 85% of student grades improved, 10% remained the same, and only 5% declined. Therefore, implementing play in kindergarten classrooms positively affects students' academic performance. Educators, parents, and society should want to advocate for play in a kindergarten classroom due to its positive impact on a child's education.

How do academic goals affect the implementation of play in inclusive settings? A newer understanding was depicted after investigating this research question. In the study, teachers reported that academic goals in kindergarten classrooms had little impact on

implementing play in inclusive settings. For other grade-level teachers, the theme of academic goals negatively influencing the implementation of play in inclusive settings was supported because teachers reported that play took time away from academics. In the teachers' comments, ten teachers reported that the stress of academics, standards, and time forces them to not include play in their classrooms. This illustrates that academic goals negatively affect play implementation in the upper elementary classrooms, whereas kindergarten was unaffected. This can be interpreted that upper-level teachers are burdened with more lectures and instruction than kindergarten teachers, who have more time to focus on play-based skill development rather than academic performance. Previous research has provided a similar theme. As teachers in Lynch's (2015 :358) ethnography from the Canadian context note, it is "instructions from the system' and 'teaching to certain standards' that leave no time for play, daily music and movement activities, or even snack time" (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019 : 788). A goal of our education system should be to develop mandated play times in not only kindergarten but other grade levels because it can help students academically.

Lastly, play and emotional literacy were studied in the kindergarten classroom. A generalization among the results is that play makes students happy, feel good, and ready to learn. Students reported their emotional standards each day at the end of the school day. During the reporting, the green zone represented children feeling focused and happy. The red zone represented children who were not focused and unhappy. For the most part, this study supports previous research that indicated play promotes the whole child, especially emotionally (Gayler & Evans 2001; Hoffmann, & Russ, 2012; Kirk, & Jay, 2018). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2018) states "during childhood adversity, play becomes even more important because the mutual joy and shared attunement that parents and children can experience during play downregulates the body's stress response" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018: 6). Therefore, policy makers, administrators, educators, teachers, and supervisors, need to include play in a kindergarten classroom to support students'

emotional literacy, meaning the children's understanding of their own emotions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The themes evident throughout the research study suggest that implementing play in a kindergarten classroom extensively benefits children's behavior, social/emotional development, language acquisition, and academic achievement. Research has proved that play and academics have a positive correlation, meaning the more play students receive, the higher their academic performance. Academic goals are better met when play is included in inclusive settings. In addition, play helps children learn how to identify emotions better, express emotions, and cope with them. Overall, play benefits kindergarten students in all aspects of their life.

The most vital statement that can be made from this research observation is that play in kindergarteen is vital in a student's life. When children incorporated play into their day, they exhibited a more remarkable ability to focus during classroom instruction. Not only did student engagement and focus increase, but student's use of communication increased as well. Students were observed using words to solve problems with peers. They engaged in collaborative conversations, too. The research illustrated that most of their grades improved when kindergarten students played in their daily schedule. This academic achievement suggests that play needs to be implemented in schools nationwide.

Recommended actions targeted to findings include developing strategies to incorporate play in the school day for kindergarten and upper levels. Play can be integrated into a classroom in several different ways. One example of including play in kindergarten would be to begin the day with a soft start. A soft start is when students find their way into the day by activating their curiosity and self-direction. In addition, play can be integrated into a school day through curriculum. Kindergarten students can use manipulatives during math. They can act out new teachings. Play does not need to be unstructured time on the playground. Play can be structured or open-ended in a classroom setting. Educational centers can be a form of play. For example, having a dramatic play center in your classroom can offer

learning opportunities. A dramatic play center that can be included is a grocery store. Students can role-play and learn math through the use of money. Free play can be a form of play. Recommendations for when to include play in kindergarten classrooms include in the morning or at the end of the school day. A classroom teacher should be responsible for implementing play. Other individuals needing consultation or information include the building principal and curriculum leaders. Play should be included in kindergarten classrooms when all responsible individuals work as a team to create opportunities for play in a school setting.

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