

Let's Play! The Power of Play as a Teaching Tool in the Elementary and Early Childhood
Classroom

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Introduction

What play-based learning looks like depends on the subject it is being used in. Overall, it involves hands-on activities and children learning through these activities. These activities can be used to teach/introduce the lesson,, or they can be used as a reinforcement. In science, it might be experimenting with cardboard and cars to understand ramps. For math, it might be using manipulatives to learn about shapes. In social studies it could be putting on a puppet show, while in English it might be playing Ispy to find words that begin with the letter p. Three research questions were created to help guide the research project. 1. Is play based learning beneficial to children's academics in grades K-6? 2. How is play based learning demonstrated in classrooms? 3. What are the differences in play based learning in grades K-6? These research questions guided the research, as well as, helped create the themes identified in this research paper.

Play can be viewed through different views such as biological, historical, societal, educational, and developmental (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Vygotsky has defined 'real' play as children creating an imaginary situation, taking on and acting out roles, and following a set of rules determined by specific roles (Bodrova, 2008). Play-based learning has several benefits for students in the areas of math, language, developmental growth and the development of the brain. All these areas are combined when there is play-based learning in the classroom (Lynch, 2015, Kessel, 2018). Play-based learning is an important teaching tool in the elementary and early childhood classrooms due to the many benefits it provides.

Literature Review

Students can show what they are best at through play. Paper and pencil tasks do not necessarily demonstrate what students know. These tasks usually have a "right answer" and

getting the wrong answer can create negative feelings for students (Grossman, n.d.). Students learn all different ways, and play allows these different ways to be included. Incorporating play into the classroom can allow students to be successful and want to continue coming to school. Play allows for math, science, English, even social studies to be incorporated as well as social and emotional skills. Play can be used to reinforce lessons already taught, but it can also be used to teach new skills and concepts (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). The types of play cover all areas of development. The types of play are artistic or design, controlled imaginary/social dramatic, exploratory, games, integrated, play using the whole school environment and beyond, replication, small world, role play and virtual play (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). There is also social play, exploratory play, pretend play and physical play (White, n.d.) among many others.

Benefits

Children in grades K-6 develop many academic and social benefits from play-based learning. Early childhood classrooms are designed to have hands-on experiences because it increases children's enjoyment and will make them excited to attend school and get an education (Kessel, 2018). Educators are starting to feel the pressures of including play-based learning in classrooms due to concerns about students falling behind in their academics. Many educators are being pressured to start teaching academic skills at younger and younger ages, which impacts early childhood activities such as play. Both academics and early childhood activities such as play can work hand in hand in classrooms. Play helps to develop abstract and symbolic thinking, which are higher order skills needed later on in life. Play-based learning, specifically make-believe play, helps children develop important skills needed for literacy learning. When children are playing, they are developing their oral language, metalinguistic awareness and imagination (Bodrova, 2008).

Social skills such as self-regulation, not excluding others, are learned through play-based learning. Children are learning to regulate each other as they play together. This happens when children “play by the rules” and directions they have agreed upon (Bodrova, 2008). Children have to be taught how not to exclude other children from play. Educators can help children with this skill. If educators notice groups of children leaving others out, they can model how to find roles for everyone in the activity (Honig, 2006). Skills learned through play-based learning continue throughout life. Some of these skills include working together with others and using creativity (Anderson, 2010). Brain development also occurs during play-based learning. One way it occurs is through exploration (Kessel, 2018).

Standards

There are some challenges with incorporating play-based learning in the classroom, but with preparation and the knowledge of the benefits play-based learning provides, educators can be successful in having play in their classrooms. Cook, (2015) talks about the importance of teaching to students. Cook talks about how you can still use Common Core or the standards to have play in your classroom. Masterson & Bohart, (2019), Rendon & Gronlund, (2017), Farber, (2015), and Briggs, & Hansen, (2012), all include lesson plans for play and show how the standards can be found in these. All these books include good examples for teachers to see how they can have the standards in their classroom while also having play. The examples are provided for teachers to get ideas for lessons or model their lessons after them to fit their students’ needs. Cook (2015) says how teachers need to teach how students learn. Play is one of the best ways to allow students to show the best way they learn, while also cultivating positive feelings surrounding school. During play, teachers can alter the lessons to fit students' needs. Altering the

lessons to students' needs help to keep learning high quality. Classrooms and students are not all the same, and play allows for teachers to be different.

Farber (2015) talks about how students should want to play games. This can translate over into having play in the classroom. Play centers and materials available to students should be what interests them. This will encourage them to be engaged while also making it fun for them. Teachers can have conversations with students to find out their interests, but they can also observe and listen to conversations. Observing and listening to conversations allows teachers to see if lessons they are teaching are interesting. If students are enjoying lessons, teachers can go deeper into the lesson or put out materials that fit the lesson to allow students to go deeper. Teachers should have conversations with their students about the types of materials they want available or different play centers. This allows students to be part of the play process, another way for them to work on all areas of development.

No Play

Teachers are not always allowed to have play in their classrooms. Sometimes administrators block teachers from having play and teachers will face disciplinary actions if they have play in their classrooms. When kindergarten teachers are in the same school as elementary school teachers, they get pressure from them to do more paper and pencil tasks than play. Curriculum is becoming more structured, making teachers think they can not have play in the classroom (Lynch, 2015).

According to the *Approaches to Intentional and Playful Learning in Preschool through Grade 3 (PK-3) Classrooms*: (2021), preschool and kindergarten play should look different from play found in the lower elementary grade classrooms. Play in the older grades should have

children investigate, create and complete learning opportunities that are increasingly more complex.

Methods

Three research questions were created to help guide the research project.

1. Is play based learning beneficial to children's academics in grades K-6?
2. How is play based learning demonstrated in classrooms?
3. What are the differences in play based learning in grades K-6?

These research questions guided the research, as well, helped create the themes identified in this research paper. This was a qualitative study, with data collected through interviews and observations.

Procedure

A list of schools and teachers were created from both the Bridgewater/South Shore area and Middlesex County in Massachusetts. Before gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Bridgewater State University, principals were contacted, in order to receive permission to enter their schools for the research study. Each principal received the same letter, it was altered to fit what was being requested from each school (Appendix A). Four schools were reached out to, with permission given from two schools. Upon receiving IRB approval, the two schools that gave permission were reached out to receive any paperwork that needed to be completed. Response was given from one school and an observation was set up in a kindergarten classroom. The other school never responded, so it was decided to move on with just one observation.

A file of teachers was created based upon connections from the researcher and the research mentor. These teachers were then emailed to seek interest in being interviewed virtually for the research study. Once a teacher agreed to be interviewed virtually, a date and time was agreed upon. A consent form (Appendix B) was sent to be signed before the virtual interview

was conducted. The virtual interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded to be analyzed later. See figure 1 for a list of educators interviewed.

Figure 1

Teacher Grade 5	Interview
Teacher Grade K	Interview/Observation
Teacher Grade 4	Interview
Teacher Grade K-2	Interview
Principal Grade 4-5	Interview
Teacher Grade 1	Interview

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was used for this research study (Appendix C). A total of 10 questions were written for the interviews; not all were asked, depending on the responses from teachers. Additional follow-up questions were asked when necessary. The questions included background information on the educator being interviewed, what play looked like in the classroom, and anything else the questions might not have covered that the educator thought was important for me to know. A checklist was used when the in person observation took place (Appendix D). This checklist was used to guide the notes being taken during the observation and allow for specific areas of play to be identified. Notes were taken during the observation and then typed up and included in the analysis. The interview notes were uploaded to Atlas.ti and analyzed using the same method as the interviews.

The one in-person interview was recorded using the voice memo app on an iPhone. This interview was transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. One interview was completed in person following the classroom observation.

Data Analysis

When the interviews were completed and the transcripts were created, they were downloaded and the researcher did initial coding of each transcript. The first look over was to check to make sure the conversation flowed. Any spelling errors, grammatical errors or words that were not completely readable were fixed to make analysis easier. Upon completion of this, analysis took place. This included a read through to get ideas of how the transcript codes should be made. The second read through was when codes were created. Once all six interview transcripts were coded, the codes were then grouped to become code groups (Bailey, 2018).

Coding the Data

The interviews were coded in order to help see themes among the interviews. There were 82 codes created in total, with some codes being split or combined into code groups. The code groups were used to help group similar codes together. They also helped break down the bigger codes into smaller codes that showed what codes were similar to each other. This helped show the similarities and differences across the interviews. If codes were not similar enough to each other, they remained in the code group. The codes within the groups are identified by the semi colon. For example, some codes remained in the problem code group while others went into the small groups such as problems: lack of time and materials. The codes that remained in the group just acknowledged that the codes might not have belonged with others.

Code Groups

The following code groups and their subgroups were created after reading through the interview transcripts:

1. Benefits of play
 - 1.1. Benefits of play: for kids

- 1.2. Benefits of play: for everyone
- 1.3. Benefits of play: teachers
2. Educator background
 - 2.1. Administration grades
 - 2.2. Grades taught
 - 2.3. Number of districts
 - 2.4. Subjects taught
 - 2.5. Years in administration
 - 2.6. Years of teaching
3. Problems
 - 3.1. Problems
 - 3.2. Problems: handling of problems
 - 3.3. Problems: lack of time and materials
 - 3.4. Problems: let kids work it out
 - 3.5. Problems: reasons problems occur
 - 3.6. Problems: situations that cause problems
 - 3.7. Problems: teacher intervenes
4. Reasons for no play
 - 4.1. Reasons for no play
 - 4.2. Reasons for no play: age level
 - 4.3. Reasons for no play: assumed skills are already learned
 - 4.4. Reasons for no play: dictated by learning minutes
 - 4.5. Reasons for no play: lack of materials

- 4.6. Reasons for no play: time
- 5. Role of teacher
 - 5.1. Role of teacher
 - 5.2. Role of teacher: bystander
 - 5.3. Role of teacher: controlling
 - 5.4. Role of teacher: encourager
 - 5.5. Role of teacher: facilitator/coach
 - 5.6. Role of teacher: guidance, role of teacher: helper
 - 5.7. Role of teacher: observer, role of teacher: outsider (not intervening)
 - 5.8. Role of teacher: passive
 - 5.9. Role of teacher: scaffolding
- 6. Time of day
 - 6.1. Time of day used
 - 6.2. Time of day used: afternoon
 - 6.3. Time of day used: built into the day
 - 6.4. Time of day used: indoor recess
 - 6.5. Time of day used: math
 - 6.6. Time of day used: morning
 - 6.7. Time of day used: reading
 - 6.8. Time of day used: science
 - 6.9. Time of day used: SEL (social emotional learning)
 - 6.10. Time of day used: social studies
 - 6.11. Time of day used: varies.

7. Types of play
 - 7.1. Types of play
 - 7.2. Types of play: academic
 - 7.3. Types of play: cooperative
 - 7.4. Types of play: dramatic play
 - 7.5. Types of play: exploratory
 - 7.6. Types of play: free play
 - 7.7. Types of play: games
 - 7.8. Types of play: guided play
 - 7.9. Types of play: imaginative
 - 7.10. Types of play: physical
 - 7.11. Types of play: play centers
 - 7.12. Types of play: recess
 - 7.13. Types of play: rewards
 - 7.14. Types of play: student choice
 - 7.15. Types of play: teacher assigned
 - 7.16. Types of play: teacher facilitated play
 - 7.17. Types of play: virtual
8. What kids do during play
 - 8.1. What kids do during play
 - 8.2. What kids do during play: building language
 - 8.3. What kids do during play: creating
 - 8.4. What kids do during play: discovering

- 8.5. What kids do during play: skill acquisition
- 8.6. What kids do during play: talking/decision-making
- 8.7. What kids do during play: working together

Some codes did not make it into code groups but are still important. They did not fit the categories of the code groups or were not big enough to warrant being split into a code group. These codes are advice, covid, earn free time, effects of no play, hopes for students, how children react to adults, how teachers see play, importance of play, no play at all, reasons for no play, rules, students struggles, thinking of what play is, and use of play. With the data coded, it is easier to see patterns and themes emerge. It also shows common thoughts between the educators interviewed.

Findings

There is now a big emphasis on school readiness, which has impacted play-based learning. Testing has increased in the classroom and curricula have become more rigid. Less and less teachers are including play in their classroom schedules due to this pressure. The emphasis on school readiness has bled its way into preschool. This is an excellent idea, but it does not mean that play has to be thrown out the window. Play and school readiness can work hand in hand to make students successful and prepared. Young children learn differently from older children and look at the world differently. Play helps prepare children for the rest of their school years and their lives outside of school. Educators do not not have to prepare students for school, but they do not have to throw play out in order to do this (Nicolopoulou, 2010). “So my job should be to help them as I told them..., not to give them the fish, but to be the fishermen who teaches them how to fish so that they can be fishermen someday,”(Kindergarten teacher). Teachers should be teaching academics, but they are also teaching students important life skills.

Play helps teach all of these skills. Stressing academics before children are ready hurts them. Children need the time to learn academics, but they also need the time to learn the social skills that play teaches them. Play can help teach both academics and social skills and should be used to help students develop all the skills needed (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003). When classrooms lack play-based learning, the children are the ones suffering. "... I personally believe that play leads to better academic skills later on, and when I say later on, I don't mean like in eighth grade I mean like even in lower elementary school because if kids don't understand play and how to interact with each other and feel safe with each other no matter what else happens... all the academic skills you teach them are going to mean nothing," (5th Grade teacher). This can be shown in academics as well as social skills. According to Almon & Miller, (2011), educators and physicians are seeing an increase in incidents involving aggressive behavior in preschool and kindergarten students and these have been linked to the stress children experience in school. Children have lost their creativity skills as they are doing more direct instruction. Children have also lost curiosity and are not seen asking questions in the classroom (Almon & Miller, 2011).

Benefits

Play-based learning has many benefits, specifically in the area of academics. Play helps children improve in the areas of math and language (Lynch, 2015). Students have different learning styles, and play-based learning allows students to learn new skills from each other. Children can be autonomous learners, creative learners, investigators, problem solvers, reflective learners and social learners (Briggs & Hansen, 2012 p. 16). Children learn language through play as they work on vocabulary specific to the activity. This can be seen especially in dramatic play. The dramatic play area is usually centered around a certain topic or environment, such as a restaurant. Students learn what a cook is, a host and a waiter/waitress (NAEYC, 2020).

Through play, children are able to learn about spatial relationships and physical properties, develop social skills and use creativity. These are all important skills that will be used in higher grades and need to be developed in order to be successful (Anderson, 2010). Through play-based learning, children are developing self-regulation (Bodrova, 2008, NAEYC), language, and it allows students the opportunity to explore the world (NAEYC, 2020). Children learn to self regulate through taking turns and playing different roles at different times. Someone might be in a role that another child wants. The children have to decide what to do, does the children remain in the role or do they switch, so the second child can have a turn. Children receive the opportunity to explore the world while playing due to the fact that different environments/settings can be brought into the play environment. One week students might be playing grocery store and the next they could be playing doctor's office (NAEYC, 2020). Play is also beneficial in the areas of cognitive development, emotional, social and physical skills. These areas are benefited through play because they help develop the whole child. Play-based learning involves all the child, not just one specific area (White, n.d.). Children are working on problem-solving skills during play as well. When students are given the opportunity to just play, they are more likely to be able to solve a problem. Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, (2003), talk about how children were given a problem to solve. Those who had the opportunity to play with the sticks before being given the problem were more likely to solve the problem. They had the chance to see how the sticks worked; some were smaller, some could fit together. With this knowledge and only the rules of not being able to get up, the children were able to retrieve their toy (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003, p. 207).

During play, children are working on their social skills by playing with their peers, but they are working on their imagination as well. The story line children are working is usually spur

of the moment and changes depending on who is playing and what roles they want to play. The story line also carries over day to day, but it changes over the course of the days (Paley, 2005). Play is awakening the creativity energy needed for intellectual development. Play is helping to develop the overall child. The creativity energy will help children reach their full potential later in life. Children are able to problem-solve through risk taking and practice skills before they are needed in a real life context (Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013, p. 29-30).

Students are able to guide their learning during play. Educators may have set out specific materials for children to explore, but it is up to the children what they want to do with them. This was seen in the kindergarten observation. The teacher had morning centers and would put out counters, Cuisenaire rods, blocks and Legos and the students could do what they wanted with them. The Cuisenaire rods are math manipulatives, but at that moment they were whatever the child wanted them to be. Having materials like this out allows children to make connections. This is when children are guiding their learning. They might make the connection that 2 of the rods are equal to another rod. This can help them in math when they are working on adding. “As I said, one day, they had the alphabet letters out. And it's exposure. It's just letting them see the letters, but then they're, you know, they're making. They're like superstars in it. I'm like what are you guys doing, my grandpa's sick, we're making him soup. But they know that it's letters, I didn't ask them to identify letters or anything, but sometimes they are. Sometimes they get the bonuses they're doing that they're counting, or they're measuring things,” (Kindergarten teacher). The children in this classroom made the connection that there is a type of pasta that is the alphabet, so they used the letters they found to make soup.

Students also learn what not to do during play. They might accidentally upset one of their friends, and then they learn they did not like that and will not do it again (Rendon & Gronlund, 2017, p. 21).

Play allows the teacher to see the whole student. Not all students do paper and pencil tasks well. “I have friends in here that do not like pencil, and paper tests. But if you give them something... give them something and let them create, that's where they're going to shine,” (Kindergarten teacher). Play can show the teacher their students’ strengths and weaknesses. “... I think the teacher gets to see the students in a different light so that's, the first thing or through a different lens I guess you could say because um sometimes a student[‘s] strength is not in the academics of sort... express themselves better, so you see their strengths,” (Upper Elementary Principal, Former 6th, 7th, 8th Grade Foreign Language Teacher). Having play-based learning allows teachers to learn more about their students and adapt their teaching style to fit their students needs.

Standards in Play

“The standards are a frame to help teachers think about what students need to learn by the end of the school year,” (Cook, 2015). The standards do not have to limit play in the classroom. The standards can be found in play, such as when students are writing down orders when playing at a restaurant in the dramatic play area or when they are exploring what blocks can build the tallest tower. Every teacher understands the Common Core standards, therefore every classroom gets a different experience with the standards. Every child has a different learning style and different needs. Having play in the classrooms allows for these differences to be met while also allowing the children to have a positive experience with the standards (Cook, 2015). According to Farber (2015), “Just about every lesson play idea can be aligned to a state’s standards or

common core state standards (p.8).” Although Farber’s book is about having games in the classroom, games still fall under play-based learning. Teachers can have play in the classroom while also covering the standards they are required to teach.

In order for students to be able to play, they must be able to follow rules that have been agreed upon, as well as converse with each other. This is covered by the Common Core State Standards for Speaking and Listening. Math and science standards can be found when students are exploring how many blocks it takes to build the tallest tower. Reading and writing standards can be found in the dramatic play area when students are taking orders at the restaurant, playing doctor or food shopping (Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler, 2016, p. 5).

When planning out play centers, educators can have certain standards in mind they hope to address. This should not be forced, as students might come up with something else in the center and another standard could be addressed. Educators should observe students while they are playing because they might see standards they had not even thought of. All areas of standards can be found in play, educators just have to be observing to see how they can be found. Children are guiding their own education when playing, and teachers are supporting them. Students aren’t aware of the standards they are supposed to be learning, but they might be hitting the ones you had in mind and even some (Rendon & Gronlund, 2017, p. 59).

Types of Play

Play comes in different forms, which allow teachers to see students’ strong suits. The types of play include artistic, sensory, fine motor, rule-based, mastery, construction, make-believe, symbolic, and language play. In artistic play, there should be plenty of materials for students to express themselves. Other centers might cross over into artistic play, such as science. Sensory play allows children to engage their senses. Children are able to see similarities

and differences. Fine-motor play helps children gain control over the mind-hand relationship while developing skills needed for writing, drawing and tasks related to life. Rule-based play is where students learn that certain games have rules that need to be followed in order for everyone to have fun. In rule-based play, children learn that some people win while others lose. In mastery play, children work on a skill until they are able to master that skill. Children are using trial and error to see what works related to the skill and what does not work. Construction play involves children building. A block area is an excellent example of this, but children can also use different materials at a construction center. Make-believe play allows children to use their imagination and have anything happen. In this type of play, children are not limited to the materials present. A dramatic play area is a splendid support to foster this type of play. Symbolic play is when one object is used to represent another object. Lastly, language play is when children are playing around with rhymes, repetitions and funny combinations of words, tell stories and sing songs usually that they have made up. The types of play can be used as individual centers, but you might also see cross over between the types of play or between centers (Dinnerstein, 2016, p. 7-10).

There are three categories of play; child-led, structured/guided and adult-led. Child-led is when the child influences what is happening in the environment as well as the materials available. In structured/guided the materials available are controlled, the educator has a specific outcome in mind they want children to discover. Adult-led is when the adult wants the child to get something specific out of the play and the child does not have as many choices in this play (Briggs & Hansen, 2012, p.64). When the educators were interviewed for this research study, most said that educators should be facilitators, bystanders, encouragers of play or on the outside and only intervene when necessary. They don't believe that teachers should be controlling play.

The only time educators said that play should be controlled was at recess, and this was more in the respect of keeping students safe; having rules of where they can and cannot go when outside, no horsing around, etc. There are three roles that educators can have in a play environment. First, educators could be a manager and control the materials, time and space. The educator could also be a facilitator, where they help children get a deeper understanding of the play happening and help mediate any problems that arise. As a player, the educator engages with the children playing. This can help the educator get students who are on the outside engaged in the play (Briggs & Hansen, 2012, p. 65).

Some students see recess as the only play time they receive. The kindergarten classroom observed had 2 recess periods. The special education K-2 teacher also said that their students receive 2 recess periods. “This was the first year that our kindergarteners had a full school day, and [the district ended up building] in two recess blocks for just them which was so important, too, because they needed to move that's a super long day right, so you know I do think that I work in a district that does acknowledge the importance of play,” (K-2 Special Education teacher). In the other grades, this was the only play that students received. This was really seen in all grades above kindergarten, except for the special education teacher. The first grade teacher did have play in their classroom, but it was a way for students to reinforce what they had already learned. “... they're reinforcing what we've already learned through the play of this game,” (1st grade teacher).

Reasons for no play

Teachers do not have play in the classroom for many reasons. There is pressure when kindergarten classrooms are in elementary schools because teachers feel “looked down upon” if their students are playing. Most principals have a background in high school teaching and do not

understand the benefits that play can bring to the classroom. They do not understand that students are able to learn through play and that students are guiding their learning when they are playing. Other teachers face disciplinary action if the principal sees play in the classroom. These reasons are why there is less, and less place found in classrooms (Lynch, 2015). From the interviews, it was shown there are a few differences in play-based learning across grades K-6. It was found that there was more play found in kindergarten and lower elementary classrooms.

Lack of time

By 4th grade, there was not as much play in the classrooms. There were a variety of reasons for not having play in the upper elementary grades, but the main reason appeared to be time. Many teachers said that their curriculum was very structured, and their day was determined by how many minutes each subject needed to be taught for. “I mean, unfortunately, like our day dictates how many learning minutes we have to have. And I really would like you know after school for them to be able to engage in more play, and not just like structured sports activities,” (5th Grade teacher). In the upper elementary grades, the only play many students received each day was their recess period. Most teachers that were interviewed wished that they could incorporate more play into their classrooms, but struggled due to the nature of their curriculums.

The main reason according to the educators interviewed for having no play in the classroom was due to time constraints. Most educators said that they have to have so many minutes of each subject, they don't have a lot of flexibility with their schedules. The 4th grade teacher interviewed said across the 4th grade teaching team at their school, there was no play at all due to the time constraint. “Honestly, I think the reason we don't like as a whole, like the fourth grade team doesn't do it, I think the reason we don't do it is just because we don't have a lot of time I hate to say it... so I think unfortunately just due to lack of time,” (4th Grade teacher).

Sadly, the only play that most students received was during recess. Other educators struggled with having the materials available to them. These educators wanted to incorporate play into their learning minutes, but due to the lack of materials available in the time to get them, they could not have play. “Usually it's just having the materials at hand. It's hard to have everything that you need...materials and time time's, always a big factor as well,” (1st grade teacher).

Age of students

The 4th and 5th grade principal interviewed said that one of the reasons they do not have play is because it is assumed that the skills learned in play have already been learned once students reach 4th and 5th grade. “I would say, for me, it was probably more of the age level, you know at six seventh and eighth grade, which is where I started my career, I would say you know the skills that students have learned, or should have learned in preschool and kindergarten having that free play and through first, second and third grade socialization and recess, I would, I guess, I was assuming that most of the students would have those types of skills already developed problem-solving, decision-making and things like that... I was assuming that the majority of students already had most of those skills in place, but I am sure that there were some students who might have been lagging in some of those skills, but I think was probably age,” (Upper Elementary Principal, Former 6th, 7th, 8th Grade Foreign Language Teacher).

Educators feel pressured to have all students meet the standards by the end of the school year. Educators also have to prepare students for high stakes assessments and benchmarks. It is thought that this can not be done through play (Masterson & Bohart, 2019, p. 22). This goes hand in hand with the learning minutes, as the standards and curriculum guide what educators have to teach in the classroom. There is a lot of pressure on classroom teachers to have students at certain academic levels throughout the year. While the idea behind this is good, it hurts

students. Not everyone learns at the same pace or the same style. Having everyone be at certain points during the year hurts them, as they are forced to learn concepts. If students are not understanding something, they will begin to dislike school as they think they can not do it. Play in the classroom gives students another way to learn the topic or express their understanding.

Remote Teaching and Play

After the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the researchers added a question about COVID-19 to the semi-structured interview. This was to see if the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted play in the classroom. For some educators, it allowed play to be in the classroom easier, while others adapted to having play virtual. Others were not impacted. The 5th grade teacher was not able to include play in their classroom, but they did not have play in the classroom before either. The 4th and 5th grade principal with other educators in the building created a program called lunch bunch. Students would log onto their computers and eat lunch with the educators. They would play fun games such as a scavenger hunt. The kindergarten teacher interviewed was able to use Flipgrid to keep play alive. The teacher would create a Flipgrid of some type of play they were doing that day. The students would then send a Flipgrid of them playing back to the teacher. The 4th grade teacher interviewed only had 8 students in their classroom during a hybrid model. This allowed the teacher to have play in the classroom such as manipulatives or science experiments. The special education teacher for grades K-2 said that their district added a second recess period for kindergarten. The district acknowledged that play is beneficial for students and that they need to play a role in allowing students the opportunity to play. The students did not care that they could not play with equipment, they would find sticks or use their imagination. The first grade teacher interviewed had choice boards in their classroom. The choice boards consisted of online

websites the students could use based on what they were learning. Students enjoyed these online websites and the teacher could see this becoming a permanent part of the schedule.

Conclusion

Play-based learning is an important teaching tool for the elementary and early childhood classrooms that is not in as many classrooms as originally believed. It is beneficial for students in both academics and social skills, as it helps develop the whole child. “Especially with the younger kids that I personally believe that play leads to better academic skills later on, and when I say later on, I don't mean like [in] eighth grade, I mean like even in lower elementary school. If kids don't understand play and how to interact with each other and feel safe with each other, no matter what else happens in the classroom later on down the road, if they're like feeling awkward and uncomfortable because they don't know how to socialize, and they didn't have enough of this place earlier on in life, all the academic skills you teach them are going to mean nothing,” (5th Grade Teacher). Many teachers feel pressured to address the standards in the classroom and don't feel that they can have both the standards and play in the classroom. The standards can be found in all aspects of play. Play allows children to feel confident, as worksheets and the pressures they feel dissuade them from loving school. Teachers should be supported by their principals, as they play a factor in play being in classrooms. Play-based learning has a spot in the classroom, and teachers should examine the standards to see where they can incorporate it.

Future Work

This research project was conducted with educators in the Bridgewater/South Shore area and Middlesex County in Massachusetts. The research project should be continued to get the

views of educators across the country. The views found in Massachusetts are not necessarily the views of play-based learning across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted this research project. The original intention for the project was to observe in 8-10 classrooms and conduct 6-8 interviews. The interview portion remained accurate, but the classroom observations decreased to 1 observation. The pandemic complicated communication and participation in the study, as more educators were being overwhelmed with tasks and were being burnt out. These added complications show how important education research is to the changing classrooms. The researcher hopes to continue looking into play-based learning to help educators understand the importance it carries.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Letter to Principal

March 2021

Dear Principal,

I am an undergraduate student at Bridgewater State University. I am currently applying for the Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant. This opportunity would allow me to do research this upcoming summer. My research topic is play-based learning. I will be investigating the teacher's views on play-based learning and the benefits it has on students.

As part of my study, I would like to observe two to three classrooms two to three times each [include the grade levels that I want]. With the social distancing guidelines in place, I understand if I can't come into the classrooms. I can also observe classrooms via Zoom or Google Meet or the platform that the classroom uses. I can speak with teachers on the phone or video chat with them via Zoom. I can also email them the questions and they can email back with their answers.

A copy of the observation checklist I will be using is enclosed. I would also like to interview the teacher's whose classes I will be observing. Attached are the interview questions I may ask as well as the consent forms for the teachers.

I will not disrupt instruction during my observation nor will I students any questions. In my study, I will not disclose any information about the school, the teachers interviewed or students observed.

For permission, all I need is an email back from you with your title and school saying I have permission to connect with teachers in your school to make a schedule.

Please contact me at j10moore@student.bridgew.edu or 978-944-4882, if you have any questions regarding my study. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Primary Researcher:

Dr. Jeanne Ingle

Assistant Professor, BSU

jingle@bridgew.edu

508-531-2517

Co-Investigator:

Jessica Moore

Undergraduate Student, BSU

j10moore@student.bridgew.edu

978-944-4882

Appendix B: Consent Form

Bridgewater State University Adult Consent Document

Title of Research: Let's Play! The power of play as a teaching tool in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education classroom.

Researchers: Jessica Moore and Dr. Ingle

You are being asked by a Bridgewater State University researcher to participate in a study. For you to be able to make an informed decision about whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the research is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits. This process is known as informed consent. This document describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks of the research project. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Summary of Study

There are both risks and benefits of participating in research studies. We want you to know the basics right now. The purpose of this research study is to find out about teachers' views on play-based learning. You will be asked to answer several questions about your views of play-based learning. Your participation in this study will last approximately thirty to forty five minutes. Participation in research might involve some loss of privacy because your views on play in the classroom, while anonymous, will become part of this study.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done because the researchers are looking at teacher's views of play-based learning.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer several questions about your teaching career and your views of play-based learning in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education classrooms.

Risks and Discomforts

Participants could become uncomfortable with questions being asked about their teaching style and their reasons for having or not having play. Participants will be made aware that if any questions make them uncomfortable they can choose to refuse to answer the question or to end the interview. Participants will also have the option of not answering any questions that are making them uncomfortable. They can choose to answer questions partially, if that is all they feel comfortable with. If participants are uncomfortable with the recording device, the recording

device will not be used in their interview. The purpose of the recording device is to make sure I catch all of the information being stated by the participant.

Can I stop being in the study?

You can stop being in this research study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty to you. If you decide to stop, we will use the answers from the questions you did answer to help us with our research.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant, but it will benefit the education field as a whole, specifically the early childhood and elementary education field. Some benefits are that people will be able to see the teacher's views on having play-based learning in the classroom. These views and the research presented will help educate parents and other educators about what happens in the classroom and what the research says should be happening in the classroom to give students the best education.

Confidentiality: How will information about me be protected?

Your study information will be kept confidential by only having your information on the consent form. The consent forms will be kept in a locked desk draw. The audio recorder will be kept in a small safe, with a code that only the researchers will know. The audio recorder itself will also have a passcode that only the researchers will know.

Compensation

No compensation will be provided.

Future Use Statement

Data collected as part of this research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used for future research studies without the consent of the participants.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator:

Primary Researcher:

Dr. Jeanne Ingle
Assistant Professor, BSU
jingle@bridgew.edu
508-531-2517

Co-Investigator:

Jessica Moore
Undergraduate Student, BSU
j10moore@student.bridgew.edu
978-944-4882

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact BSU Institutional Review Board: Maxwell Library, Room 200
10 Shaw Road, Bridgewater, MA 02325
Tel: 508.531.1242

Contact the number above to ask general questions, to obtain information or offer input, and to express concerns or complaints about research. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or if you wish to talk to someone else. General information about participation in research studies can also be found at <https://my.bridgew.edu/departments/IRB/SitePages/Home.aspx>.

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

By signing below, you agree that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
- you understand that Bridgewater State University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
- you are 18 years of age or older;
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
- you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Version Date: 02/24/2020

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How many years have you been teaching?
 - a. Have you taught in the same district your entire career?
 - b. What grades and/or subjects have you taught?
2. Do you use play in your classroom?
 - a. If so, what types of play can be found in your classroom?
 - b. When do you use play?
 - i. Subjects?
 - ii. Time of day?
 - iii. Day of the week?
3. Can you describe what children in your classroom are doing during play?
4. What do you think are the benefits of play?
5. Are there problems when there is playtime or play is used in your classroom?
6. If you don't use play in your classroom, why?
 - a. Did you ever use play?
7. What is the role of the teacher during play?
8. Have you been able to integrate play in your virtual or hybrid classroom?
 - a. If so, how have you incorporated it?
9. Is there anything else that you are thinking about related to play or is there anything else I should be thinking about related to play? (any final thoughts)
 - a. Do you ever play any games for math?
 - b. Anything I am missing from your thinking about play?
10. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix D: Observation Checklist

Classroom Observation Checklist

✓	Type of Play	Notes/Description	When? (Time/Day)	How long
	Guided Play			
	Free Play			
	Play Centers			
	Teacher Facilitated Play			
	Cooperative Play			
	Games			
	Student choice			

	Teacher assigned			
	Dramatic play			