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Finding the Link Between Play and Literacy Learning in Kindergarten

A Project Presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Rachel Modrow

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in  
Curriculum and Instruction

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**Abstract**

In many schools, children's free play time is being taken away and is replaced with more academic time. When children enter kindergarten, they are five to six years old. These young children need to participate in free play in the classroom to help build their social skills, continue their imagination, and allow them to explore. Children entering kindergarten are beginning their first school experiences by learning basic literacy skills such as reading and writing. This study observed students free play time in a kindergarten classroom to see if students are using literacy skills in their play. If the students show they are using literacy skills in play they should be allowed more play in the school day. In this study, the researcher observed a kindergarten classroom for a week to view how students were playing during free play time and if they used literacy skills in play.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Introduction**

The transition from preschool to kindergarten can be hard for young children. One of the biggest differences between these grades is the change in children's play time. In the kindergarten classroom, play is seen as not essential and there is a greater push for academics from the state level. This study will be focusing on the benefits of children's play and how teaching literacy can contribute to children's free play in the classroom. Throughout this study, the researcher will be looking at the skills that are taught in a literacy lesson and how they correlate to the way that children are playing during free play after the lesson.

#### **Brief Literature Review**

Teaching literacy skills and allowing children to have free play time are both important in the kindergarten classroom. When students enter kindergarten, they are beginning to learn all the basic literacy skills to help them start reading and writing. Children also need to have free play time in the classroom to explore and use their imagination. There have been many studies on the importance of free play in the kindergarten classroom and how to teach literacy in the classroom.

One article published by the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* focuses on teaching in a play-based curriculum versus teaching in a teacher-driven classroom. Teaching with a child-centered approach instead of a teacher-driven approach can be very beneficial to young children. In a play-based classroom the students are still expected to learn how to read, write, do mathematics, learn social skills and develop motor skills. Students can gain these skills from free play in the classroom. This article studied vocabulary development while children were playing. An

example of how students can learn vocabulary skills while free play is in the dramatic play center. If the kitchen was set up in the dramatic play area and the students were pretending to make an apple pie they may learn new vocabulary words. When playing, the teacher can be nearby and suggest to the students, “we have to take these little lumps out of the flour.” A child may respond, “yes we need this thing with the little holes.” The teacher would reply with a new vocabulary word, “All right, we need a *sieve*.” (Oers et. al., 2013). In this example, the teacher could use the new vocabulary word many times and the students can also actively use new vocabulary during play. If the teacher was in a teacher-centered classroom the students would not have grown their vocabulary like they did in this example of free play. This shows how free play in the classroom can be very beneficial to students and it can help them learn literacy skills.

In the study conducted by the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, they discussed how the students in a play-based classroom were able to take part in meaningful play and learned new words from their play. Children learned from exploration of different activities. “The data showed that the children in the play-based programme often used the target words in their interactions with other children, and by doing so the children explore the usability of these words as a means for communicating and interpersonal regulations” (Oers et. al., 2013). This research has shown that having free play in the classroom is important and can benefit children's learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In this study, the researcher will be studying the effects that teaching a literacy lesson has on children's free play. Free play in the kindergarten classroom has been greatly reduced since the United State adopted the common core standards. The common core standards are a, “set of shared national standards ensuring that students in every state are held to the same level of

expectations” (Kendall, 2011). These standards created a common goal that all students would be learning the same things in the kindergarten classroom. This created more direct instruction from the teacher and less time for children to explore and play in the classroom. The school district where this study will be conducted currently doesn’t have a set amount of time for free play but most kindergarten classroom teachers give twenty-five to thirty minutes of free play at the end of the day. Sometimes this free play time is less for students who receive interventions in reading, math, and speech, if a student was absent and needed to make up work the class completed while they were gone, or other classroom disturbances.

The current issue that will be addressed in this study is the importance and benefits of play in kindergarten. For many schools free play time is something that has been going away because there isn’t enough time in the day to cover the standards and allow students the opportunity to play. In this study, the researcher is going to be evaluating if students are showing academic skills in their free play. This could help bring free play back into the classroom. Teachers can create play-based strategies to lessons to help increase more play in the classroom along with the standards-based curriculum (Bowdon, 2015). Creating play in the classroom for students during lessons is important for them but it’s not the same as free play in the classroom where they can make choices on where to play and what to do.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to view the effects of free play in the kindergarten classroom after a literacy lesson. Students who are five and six years old still need free play in their lives to be imaginative and explore on their own. This topic is very important because many schools are reducing their free play time. By completing this study hopefully, the importance of free play can

be viewed by others and it can be brought back into more classrooms without a pushback from administration. If the administration from schools could see a positive influence that free play has for kindergarten students in their academic learning, they may feel more comfortable allowing the students to have more free play time during the day.

While conducting this study, the link between children's free play and literacy learning skills will be assessed. This is important to view because if students are showing literacy skills that they have recently learned during their free play time it would provide evidence that children should be having free play time in the classroom and they are learning from that time.

### **Research Question(s)**

Does a literacy lesson in kindergarten increase the children's literacy skills in free play?

### **Definition of Variables**

The following are the variables of study:

- **Independent Variable:** The independent variable for this study will be literacy skills. The students will be taught a lesson on literacy skills. Literacy skills include reading, writing, speaking, listening and language.
- **Dependent Variable:** The dependent variable for this study will be free play. After the lesson is taught students will be participating in free play throughout the classroom.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important for the practitioner and participates because it could change the way that free play is viewed in kindergarten classrooms. Conducting this study will help show if students combine newly taught literacy skills to their free play. All children should have a long

period of uninterrupted free play time in the classroom each day. They are not always getting this free play time because there is always something else that the teacher can teach and have them learn. If students are able to show that they can make connections to a teacher directed lesson to their free play, a teacher may be more likely to allow them to play for a longer period of time. The researcher will be sharing the results of this study with her fellow colleagues to hopefully share evidence that children are using literacy skills in free play.

### **Research Ethics**

**Permission and IRB Approval.** In order to conduct this study, the researcher will seek MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study will be sought from the school district where the research project will take place (See Appendix A).

**Informed Consent.** Protection of human subjects participating in research will be assured. Participant minors will be informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Assent (See Appendix B) that the researcher will read to participants before the beginning of the study. Participants will be aware that this study is conducted as part of the researcher's Master Degree Program and that it will benefit her teaching practice. Informed consent means that the parents of participants have been fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought and that parents understand and agree, in writing, to their child participating in the study (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014). Confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time will be outlined both, verbally and in writing.

### **Limitations**

The study is being conducted in one kindergarten classroom that consists of twenty students. This could serve as a limitation because there will be no comparison to any other kindergarten classrooms. The researcher will be the only one observing the students in free play and taking notes. There could be barriers in observing free play if a student asks questions or talks to the researcher during the observation, the researcher would then turn their attention to the student to discuss and then get back to observing and they could miss some conversations that students have during free play. The way that the literacy lesson is taught can also be a limitation. The literacy lesson taught may be more engaging on some days and less engaging on other days to some students.

### **Conclusions**

The researcher believes that this study will be able to help teachers understand the importance of free play and how students are able to show literacy skills in free play. The study that is being conducted could help the future of kindergarten classrooms increase the amount of free play time in the classroom. In the next chapter, there will be literature about free play and literacy learning, and important theoretical framework that supports this study and its relevance.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Having students participating in play in the kindergarten classroom is very important for their learning. In this chapter, the researcher describes the importance of play in the kindergarten classroom and how it can relate to literacy learning. The shift from a more play-based approach to the now standards-based kindergarten is described. There are then many studies that have looked at the importance of play and literacy that are summarized. There is a description for how literacy learning and play can be combined in the classroom and theoretical framework that describes Lev Vygotsky and how his theory relates to children's play.

#### Background on Children's Play

Play in the kindergarten classroom is very important for young children. Play is a key factor in promoting learning and development in children (Li et. al., 2016) Children can also be building their literacy learning skills through play. These literacy skills include areas in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and language. There have been many studies done about children learning literacy skills through play.

A study done by the *Early Childhood Education Journal*, looked at the evidence of how play can be an effective context for literacy development. Pyle et al. (2018) researched the implementation of academic learning in a play-based classroom. This study had three objectives, “to analyze the enacted integration of literacy instruction and play-based learning, to describe if and how play is used to support the development of children’s literacy skills, and to articulate a

theory that bridges the theoretical disconnect between the academic and developmental orientations” (Pyle et al., 2018). This study included twelve full-day kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. The observations were done in the classrooms for a minimum of ten hours on the instruction of literacy concepts during instructional periods and the integration of literacy behaviors during play.

The results of this research showed that teachers would rather have their class play by participating in free play than to more structured play. The teachers that integrated play and learning into their classroom believed that, “play nurtures children’s academic learning, such as their reading and writing skills” (Pyle et al., 2018, p. 121). In some of the classrooms, it was shown that the reading center and the writing/art center were the only centers rich in literacy materials, other classrooms had literacy throughout the classroom with text labels on different materials for students to use. At the end of the study, the data showed that while we can provide an environment that is rich in literacy materials this does not necessarily encourage literacy behaviors in children’s play. The article continues to state that, “other factors may be more important in promoting literacy engagement during play, such as teacher involvement and extension in the context of play” (Pyle et al., 2018, p. 122).

### **Literacy Learning**

Children enter kindergarten with a range of literacy skills. Literacy learning contains a wide range of topics such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and other language skills. Reading and writing abilities develop through our lifespan although “the early childhood years, from birth to age eight, are the most important period for literacy development” (Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, 1998, p. 196).

With the push for academics so high in schools these skills are often taught through direct instruction by the teacher. When the Common Core State Standards were adopted in 2009 they changed education. These standards “present a clear and consistent set of expectations regarding what students ought to know, understand, and be able to do” (Murphy, 2012). There are standards in English, language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science. From the time of this article being posted, the common core standards had been adopted in forty five states and the District of Columbia, with these standards it leaves little time for classrooms to have free play (Murphy, 2012).

The International Reading Association and the National Association of the Education of Young Children in *Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children Position Statement* (1998) has created a set of recommendations for teachers on how to teach literacy which follow developmentally appropriate practices. They created five phases for the development of reading and writing. They are awareness and exploration, experimental reading and writing, early reading and writing, transitional reading and writing, and independent and productive reading and writing. Focusing on phase two, experimental reading and writing (goals for kindergarten) some of the developmentally appropriate practices include, encouraging children to talk about reading and writing, frequently read interesting and conceptually rich stories and creating a literacy-rich environment for children to engage independently in reading and writing (Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, 1998, p. 200).

One example of how these practices would look in the kindergarten classroom is engaging students in shared writing. When doing this the teacher can “pause before writing a

word, say it slowly, and stretch out the sounds as they write it” (Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, 1998, p. 204). By doing this, students are able to build skills on how to sound out words and gain a knowledge on print and the alphabetic nature of English.

Another recommendation from the *Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children Position Statement* (1998) was to frequently read interesting and conceptually rich stories. This can be done in the kindergarten classroom by “telling stories, reading picture books and big books, singing songs and reciting poems, reading from posted charts, drawing and writing with invented and conventional spellings, taking dictation from children, and helping children write their own stories” (Almon et. al., 2015).

When creating an environment that will increase children’s literacy development there should be daily experiences of children being read aloud to and independent reading, daily opportunities of different types of text which could include short stories, lists, poems, and other. Students should have writing experiences in the classroom that allow flexibility. Lastly, teachers should be focusing on more individualized instruction for children (Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, 1998).

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) has examined the effectiveness of many preschool and kindergarten programs and interventions that are aimed at the development of early literacy and conventional literacy skills. One intervention that took place was teaching the alphabetic principle. This gives children the knowledge that letters in written words represent the sounds in spoken words (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). They focused on the impact of literacy-focused curriculum in the kindergarten classroom. This study relates to the research

because the researcher will be teaching a literacy lesson and will be observing the impact the lesson has on free play. This study found that programs in schools, “do affect young children’s development of conventional literacy skills as well as important emergent literacy skills” (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008). They found that students were able to have better spelling, better reading development, and the most common outcome was a positive impact on oral language, particularly vocabulary development.

### **Children’s Free Play**

Children’s free play time is very important for the kindergarten age. One of the first issues to define is, what is play? There are many types of play that children engage in during the school day. “Pretend play involves pretending, the use of fantasy and make-believe, and the use of symbolism.” (Russ, 2004). Children play in the classroom using pretend play as their main form of play. While engaging in pretend play, one area of the classroom that students are seen in is the dramatic play center. This area of the classroom can be seen with dress up clothes, a play kitchen, grocery store, doctors office, and other real-life places where children are able to create their own play.

Other ways that children are able to create pretend play in the classroom are using manipulative toys, reading books, creating puzzles, creating art, and other hands-on materials. There have been many books published on the topic of play for children and why play is so important for the growing child. One book, titled, “Playing to Learn” discusses the importance of play for children. The book begins by describing play and Smidt defines play as, “ a way of being able to use hands-on or real or life-like situations to answer questions that arise in children’s heads as they constantly seek to make sense of their lives, experiences, and feelings”

(Smidt, 2011). When viewing children's play this definition of play is very present in the way that children use real life scenarios that they experience and see to center their play around.

Many schools are beginning to eliminate free play time in their classrooms. This free play time is being replaced with academic learning such as teacher guided lessons and teacher guided centers. The eliminated free play time has been the center of many studies, one study recently examined kindergarten teacher's behavioral intentions to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. Two of the main reasons why teachers would change their implementation are that they have support from their principals and colleagues, and teachers' sense of efficacy can affect their willingness to implement new initiatives (Yin et al., 2021).

This was a very large study from Hong Kong where five hundred and forty-two teachers from forty different kindergartens participated. They used four different scales to measure the data that was collected. The first scale is the instructional leadership scale, which was used to measure teachers' perceptions of principal instruction leadership. Second, trust in colleagues scale was used to measure teachers' perceived trust in colleagues. Third, teachers' self-efficacy scale, used to assess three types of self-efficacy beliefs, which were instructional strategies, classroom management, and child engagement. Lastly, behavioral intention scale, which was used to measure teacher's intention to implement play-based learning.

The results of the study showed that teachers that were more likely to implement play-based learning in their classrooms had strong principal instruction leadership and trust in colleagues. Having trust in colleagues has a positive impact on play in kindergarten because teachers are more willing to share experiences in the classroom with others when they are able to trust each other. "By encouraging colleagues to feel safe to experiment with innovative

strategies, trust in colleagues serves as the facilitator of their sense of self-efficacy, which in turn has a positive impact on their intentions to implement play-based learning” (Yin et al., 2021).

Bringing play back into the kindergarten classroom could be very beneficial for these young children. Many children come from a preschool or daycare setting where they are used to playing all day. When these young children are starting kindergarten, they are missing out on key learning that can be done through play because the push for academics is so strong in the classrooms.

### **Combining Literacy Learning and Free Play**

Incorporating literacy learning and free play together can be beneficial for children to begin to gain literacy skills and still have free play time. An article published from the *Alliance for Childhood and Defending the Early Years*, describes the way that children learn. In this article, they state that “children learn through playful, hands-on experiences with materials, the natural world, and engaging, caring adults” (Almon et al., 2015). Through free play children will begin to build a foundation and understanding of literacy learning. Children begin with oral language development and then move into print literacy.

During the oral language stage of literacy learning in play children are talking and listening to each other and to their teachers. Through this, children are able to attach words to their actions, grow their vocabulary and use more complex grammar. As children create artwork, build with blocks, and use imaginative play they are deepening their understanding of word meanings. Children begin to build their foundation for reading and print literacy when they are

listening to stories, creating stories, singing songs, and reciting poems and chants. All these free play opportunities for children create literacy learning in free play.

Combining literacy learning and free play is important for children because all children develop at different rates. Through free play children can learn at their own ability, be able to explore on their own and learn literacy skills. “Between the ages of three and six years, children gain an abundance of experience with print and books in home and school settings” (Autry et al., 2020). Children gain a lot of literacy skills in these four years and they all grow at different rates. Allowing children to free play will help them gain their literacy skills at the level they are at.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Lev Vygotsky is one of the most important theorists when it comes to children's play. The play that Vygotsky describes in his views focuses on the make-believe type of play. This is not what many parents and educators today view as play. According to Vygotsky, “make believe play has three distinct features: children create an imaginary situation, take on and act out roles, and follow a set of rules determined by these roles” (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). When children use make believe play as Vygotsky describes they are really beginning to get creative and use abstract thinking. This type of play is not seen very often anymore in schools since free play time is becoming eliminated in classrooms.

### **Research Question(s)**

Does a literacy lesson in kindergarten increase the children's literacy skills in free play?

## **Conclusions**

Literacy learning and free play are both very important in the kindergarten years. Free play is beginning to go away in many classrooms and there is less time set aside for unstructured free play for children. This is happening because of the push for academics in kindergarten. In the next chapters the researcher will be looking at the link between literacy learning and free play and if students are able to connect the two. If students are showing literacy skills while they are playing there could be more evidence to bring free play back into the classrooms.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

This study was conducted to view the relation between teaching a literacy lesson in kindergarten and how the students use literacy in free play. Free play in the classroom is becoming limited in many schools. This study is important because if students are using literacy skills in free play it could help bring play back into the kindergarten classroom. Free play in the classroom has been measured in many studies. The most common way to measure free play is thorough observation and student interviews. The researcher used observation in the classroom to get the results for this study.

#### **Research Question(s)**

Does a literacy lesson in kindergarten increase the children's literacy skills in free play?

#### **Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative research design to collect data on whether students are using literacy skills in free play. Using this design the researcher used non-participant observation studies, which means she will not be participating in the free play but rather will observe the students at play both in person and from a video recording. This design was selected because the best way to view students free play is through observation without interrupting the students in play.

#### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a kindergarten classroom in an elementary school located in a small town west of the twin cities. The population of the town is 14,178 and is known for

manufacturing. Most common is the 3M Corporation which is known for creating post-it notes, scotch tape, and other office supplies. This research was conducted in a preschool through 1st grade school. According to the Minnesota Report Card, there are four hundred and two students at the school with an attendance rate of 83.2%. The demographics of the school is, 80.6% White, 14.4% Hispanic or Latino, 3.2% two or more races, 1.2% Black or African American and less than 1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander and Asian. With the COVID pandemic, all students are currently continuing to have free breakfast and lunch although it's reported that 30.1% of students are eligible for free and reduced meals. In the school, 9% of students are English learners and 25.4% of students are in Special Education.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were twenty students from the researcher's Kindergarten classroom during the 2021-2022 school year. The students participating were five to six years old. The demographics of this class are, 55% male and 45% female. The ethnicity of the students are 85% white, 10% two or more races, and 5% Hispanic/Latino. In this class there are 75% of students that are living with both parents, 25% live in single-parent homes and 20% that switch between two homes. 5% of students in this class receive special education services.

### **Sampling**

The participants in this study were chosen from a convenience sample. The students were selected for this study because they are a part of the researcher's classroom.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument used to collect data from participants was an observation during their free play time along with a video recording. The researcher observed the classroom play time

throughout a five day school week. In the researcher's classroom there are many areas for students to play. Students can be in the dramatic play kitchen, table spots, library area, blocks and the open area at the front of the classroom where they can bring toys. Since there are so many areas students could be in, the researcher will be observing one or two areas that are next together and have an iPad set up near another area to video and watch the play at a later time to record data.

During this observation the researcher used a notebook to record the play. She recorded the center that she was observing and documented quotes from the students, student work, and looked for students using literacy skills. Examples of literacy skills could be, talking about the sight words or letters of the week, writing words and sounding out words, discussing rhyming or other phonemic awareness skills, along with other skills that were recently taught during the classroom core reading time.

#### **Data Collection.**

To collect data for this research, the researcher will be using observation in the classroom. As students are participating in free play the researcher will be observing the way the students are playing and if they are using their newly taught literacy skills. This data will be collected by listening to the students' oral language and viewing their written work during play. The data will be collected from the different centers in the classroom which are, dramatic play, library center, block center, front of the classroom, and playing at their table spots.

#### **Data Analysis.**

To summarize the data, the researcher looked at her notes from observing free play. She compared data from the various play areas in the classroom to see what areas of the classroom the most literacy skills were seen in.

**Research Question(s) and System Alignment.**

Does a literacy lesson in kindergarten increase the children’s literacy skills in free play?

Table 3.1.

Research Question(s) Alignment

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Research Paradigm	Research Design	Research Question	Variables	Instrument(s)	Source(s) and expected Sample Size	Data Analysis
Quantitative	Non - participant observation	Does a literacy lesson in kindergarten increase the children’s literacy skills in free play?	DV: Free Play  IV: Literacy Skills	Observation of students during free play	Kindergarten classroom participants  Sample size: 20 (all students in a kindergarten classroom)	When students are free playing it will be recorded how/if they are using literacy skills.  Where in the classroom students are using literacy skills will be recorded.

### **Procedures**

In this study the researcher is the classroom teacher. The teacher will instruct a literacy lesson during the classroom core reading time. The literacy lesson will consist of teaching the letter and sight words of the week along with the literacy focus based on the school's reading curriculum. These literacy lessons could consist of rhyming, sequencing, or other literacy lessons. When the teacher is finished with the lesson the students will be participating in free play in the classroom for 30 minutes. When the students free play in the classroom there are five centers they can choose from. They can be in the dramatic play center, table spots, library center, blocks or at the front of the classroom where there is a big open space. During free play time the researcher spent a day sitting in each center to observe the students. The center that the researcher was not able to be in, she set up an iPad nearby to video record the students play so she can still observe the center and look for literacy learning taking place.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher has considered many considerations to protect the wellbeing of participants. This study was completed by observing students that were under the age of 18. The students' parents or guardians were given an informed consent form to sign allowing their child to participate in the research. In this, it was explained the purpose of the study and how the students would be participating. Throughout the study, students' identities will be kept confidential. To ensure that the students remain anonymous their names will be blurred out of students' samples and changed.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter focused on the methodology of the research completed on children's play and literacy skills. The students will be engaging in free play and the researcher will be using observation as their data analysis. The following chapter will be reviewing the results of the research.

## **Chapter 4**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

This study was completed to see if students in a kindergarten classroom use literacy skills in their free play in the classroom. In many schools, students' free play time is starting to go away and there is a greater push for academics throughout the school day. Eliminating free play time can be tough for young children because free play is a time for them to be curious, explore, grow and learn on their own through play. The purpose of this study was to see if students are showing literacy skills in their free play time.

#### **Data Collection**

To collect data for this study, the researcher observed a kindergarten classroom for one week during their free play time. While observing, the researcher sat nearby an area of the classroom and took notes in a notebook while the students were playing. She recorded the area of the classroom and if there were any literacy skills observed (See Appendix C). There was also an iPad set up near another area of the classroom which was recording play.

#### **Results**

##### ***RQ 1: Does a literacy lesson in kindergarten increase the children's literacy skills in free play?***

The data collected for this study came from observing a kindergarten classroom during play time for twenty to thirty minutes a day. The areas of the classroom that were observed were the dramatic play center, library center, block center, the front of the classroom where there is a large open space, and students table spots. The most common areas that literacy skills were observed in were at students table spots and in the library center. These two areas offer many opportunities for students to use literacy skills. At table spots, students are in the space that they

do their learning in throughout the day. In the library area, students are surrounded by books and posters which promote literacy. In the other centers of the classroom, students are still able to see many posters on the walls which promote literacy but they are not as focused on literacy skills.

Table 1 shows the number of literacy skills that were observed throughout the week. Any time the researcher noticed students displaying literacy skills she made a tally mark and made a comment about what literacy skill was shown. At students' table spots there were seven literacy skills observed. In the classroom library there were six skills. At the front of the classroom there is a big open space where two literacy skills were observed. In the dramatic play area there was one skill observed and in the block center there were no literacy skills shown.

**Table 1**

*Observation notes*

Areas of the Classroom	Number of Literacy Skills Observed
Table Spots	7
Library	6
Front of the Classroom	2
Dramatic Play	1
Blocks	0

At students' table spots there were seven literacy skills observed throughout the week. These skills included writing and taking out work that was completed during the literary lesson to look back at. When writing at table spots, students were observed writing names, sentences, sight words, the alphabet and other words. Students would look at the classroom walls where

there were many posters to assist with their writing. Students also took out work that was part of the literacy lesson that they weren't able to finish earlier in the day. Some examples of this classwork were, sight word books to color, a worksheet for making CVC words, and a *Let's Find Out* magazine with a story that was read.

In the library center there were six literacy skills observed. In this center students were looking at books, the posters on the wall, and the pillows in the center. Literacy skills observed in this center included looking through books, tracing the letters on the pillows, talking about books, reading the color posters on the wall and spelling the color names, and singing the ABC's. In this center there were a lot of verbal literacy skills observed. In one interaction students were looking at the color posters on the wall and spelling the colors. "How do you spell yellow?" student A asked the other two students. "Y-E-L-L-O-W," student B said. "No, so it's W-H-I-T-E," student A replied. "No, that's white," student B said. "This is how you spell blue, B-L-U-E," student C said. "This is how you spell pink, P-I-N-K," student B said back, then student A said, "I know how to spell red, R-E-D." This conversation showed literacy skills in the library center because the students were working together to spell the color names by memory and looking at the posters if they needed help.

On another day, two students were looking at books in the library center and one student picked up the book *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr and John Archambault and said, "I can read this book." Another student replied and said "I like Pete the Cat." They were having a conversation about the books they enjoyed.

Another literacy skill that was observed in the library center came from a lesson taught the day before. The students were taught about animals hibernating in the winter for a reading lesson. In this lesson there was a story read about hibernation, a short video that was watched

about the different animals that hibernate, and a game where the students had to find where animals would be while in hibernation. The next day many students were seen in the library center curled up into little balls and under the chairs while telling each other, “we’re hibernating,” or, “want to hibernate with us?”

There were two literacy skills observed in the front of the classroom. This area is an open space where students come to during instruction and sit on the floor. In this area, students were observed using writing and hands-on building words as the literacy skills. Students were looking at the poster at the front of the classroom that shows each student's name in the class. They were writing down all the names of students and making a list. Another group of students in this area were building puzzles of four letter words. When building puzzles the students had to match the pieces together to make words. When they matched the pieces a picture was above the word and they would read what word they made.

In the dramatic play center, there was one literacy skill observed. There is a kitchen set in the center with a play stove, dishes, table and chairs. One day a group of three students were playing school at the table. One student was the teacher and was telling the other students letters to write. They were pointing to the alphabet posters on the walls to write their letters. In this center the students were using verbal literacy skills by telling each other letters to write and the other students were using writing skills.

### **Data Analysis.**

The results of this study showed that students were showing literacy skills in their free play. The most literacy skills shown were at students' table spots and in the library center. When beginning this study, the researcher had thought that the library would show the most literacy

skills because of the books that students could read. When observing the library center the researcher was surprised to see that the students were rarely reading the books. The majority of the literacy skills were verbal; students were talking about how to spell words, their favorite books, and they referred to posters on the wall.

Each day the researcher was observing the classroom she saw many of the same skills. Students wrote letters every day at their table spots. They would look at the alphabet posters on the wall and copy the letters down. This was surprising to the researcher, she didn't realize how much the students utilized the alphabet on the wall. Students were also writing numbers and doing math skills at this time. They utilized the alphabet and number posters along the room to help in their free play time.

Every day the class reviews letter names and sounds multiple times during the literacy lessons. There are two literacy blocks throughout the day where students are reviewing these skills. Students were using these skills in their free play when they would write letters and when they all sang the ABC's. Although students didn't practice their letter sounds during free play they were still using the letter names in play.

The only literacy activity that the students did in free play that related directly to the literacy lesson of the day was practicing hibernating in the classroom. This was observed the day after teaching a lesson and reading a story on animals that hibernate. Many students started curling up into balls and lying in the library center. Some put their sweatshirts over their bodies to hide or went under a chair. When doing this they told each other they were hibernating and asked other students to join them.

One of the struggles that the researcher found while collecting data was watching the recorded videos back. This class plays very loudly, some days more than others. There were

some videos where it was hard to hear the students in the center being observed because there was noise from the whole classroom. Through the videos, the researcher was able to observe the students visually, but when they were talking to each other, especially when they were farther away, it was hard to hear their conversations.

In a study conducted by the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, they discussed play-based classrooms and described that students learn from using verbal skills and communicating with each other (Oers et. al., 2013). This was shown in the study. The majority of the observations done were verbal between students. Students were playing school where they told each other letters to write, spelling words together, talking about their favorite books, and encouraging their friends to play literacy based games with them.

Many of the literacy skills observed were shown from the video recording. When the teacher is nearby sometimes students will change what they are doing and play differently with each other because they know they are being watched. Using the video recording, students were more like themselves and didn't feel the pressure of the teacher watching them play. Using the recordings was also a great way to collect data because the researcher was able to sit and watch one area of the classroom and view the other area of the classroom later from a recording.

## **Conclusion**

The data collected for this study showed that students use literacy skills in their free play. During free play, students were showing literacy skills at their table spots and in the library center most often. There were also literacy skills shown in the front of the classroom and in the dramatic play center. The majority of the literacy skills observed were verbal interactions

between students. In these interactions, students were talking about how to spell words and discussing books. Students also showed writing skills by writing letters and sight words. By looking at these results, we are able to see that students use literacy skills learned during instruction in their free play.

## **Chapter 5** **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

This study was completed to see if students were using literacy skills that had been taught in a lesson during their free play. In many kindergarten classrooms, free play is being eliminated and more whole class academic learning is taking place. This can affect young children because many of their social skills and imagination are shown during play. This study showed that students in a kindergarten classroom are using literacy skills in their play. Many of the skills observed were verbal, including spelling words to each other and talking about books and the alphabet. There were also a high number of writing skills taking place during free play, including writing letters, sight words, and student names. Students used their surroundings in the classroom to show literacy skills by looking at posters around the classroom.

### **Action Plan**

This study showed that students in a kindergarten classroom use literacy skills in their free play. After completing this study, the researcher plans to continue to allow the students to play for at least twenty minutes a day, if not more. Throughout the school day, they play at the end of the day before going home. More play could be incorporated into the middle of the school day to allow students to get a break from academics and explore on their own since they are showing academic skills in play.

If students played for a longer period of time the classroom teacher could assist in using literacy skills by providing more literacy-based toys, more hands-on literacy activities, and having more discussions with students during play. In the classroom, there aren't many toys that promote literacy specifically, there could be an area of the classroom to display more literacy

toys for students to explore on their own. There are puzzles that students put together with the alphabet, but there could be more hands-on alphabet blocks, magnetic letters, and games for students to play with.

For students, this would have a major impact. They would be able to free play for more time during each day. As a student, free time is always something they look forward to in the day so this would be a positive experience for them to enjoy school. In the play they don't realize the skills they are building and learning. Besides literacy skills, students are building social emotional skills through play every day, they are learning how to take turns, share, and be a good friend to others.

For other teachers, this study shows that free play in the classroom is important and students are benefitting academically from play. This could help add more play into the school day. There is a lot of material that needs to be taught each day so incorporating these lessons into play could be something that is looked at for the future. Having young students sit and listen for a long period of time can be hard; incorporating some play into lessons could help with students' success in the classroom.

### **Plan for Sharing**

The researcher plans on sharing the results of this research to her colleagues at their next PLC meeting. They have many discussions about play already, so this can help aid in promoting play in the classroom. She will also be sharing these results with her principal. When bringing this research to the principal's attention before conducting the research, she was interested to learn more about it. She has always encouraged play for the littlest learners and understands the importance of play in the classroom. When sharing this study, the major point that the researcher

would provide is her observations in the classroom through the data she collected, specifically the areas of her classroom that showed the most literacy skills and some of the examples that demonstrated literacy practice. This could help other teachers and the administration to think about incorporating more play in the classroom. A lot of the push for academics comes from the state level of tests and standards that must be taught in kindergarten. After viewing these results there could be ways to cover the standards through play in the classroom so students are able to learn the skills they need and also have time to explore and play.

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**Appendix A**  
**IRB Approval**

**Institutional Review Board**



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**DATE:** January 28, 2022

**TO:** Kristen Carlson, Principal Investigator  
Rachel Modrow, Co-investigator

**FROM:** Dr. Robert Nava, Chair  
Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB

**ACTION:** **APPROVED**

**PROJECT TITLE:** [1864704-1] Finding the Link Between Play and Literacy Learning in Kindergarten

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** New Project

**APPROVAL DATE:** January 28, 2022

**EXPIRATION DATE:**

**REVIEW TYPE:** Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of .

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Letter

October 17, 2021

West Elementary  
875 School Rd SW  
Hutchinson, MN 55350

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your child has been invited to participate in a study to see how they are using skills taught in a reading lesson in their free play.

Your child was selected because they are in my kindergarten classroom. If you decide to participate, please understand that your child will be asked to do the following,

1. Your child will be taught a reading lesson by the teacher which follows the standards and curriculum that our school uses.
2. After the lesson they will participate in free play which the teacher will observe.

These are classroom activities that we already have in place and are already in our routine, there would be no change to our schedule. This information is being used to help me complete my master's degree at Minnesota State University Moorhead. I need to have parental consent to use the observations I make in my final paper that I am required to complete as part of my degree.

If you sign this form, you are giving me consent to use the information that I gather for my final paper. All information will be confidential, there will be no names used. Please also note that your child can choose not to participate at any time without any consequences.

Please feel free to ask any questions you have regarding this study. You may contact me at school by 320-587-4470 ext. 3030, by email at [rachel.modrow@isd423.org](mailto:rachel.modrow@isd423.org) or by remind message. You can also contact my MSUM faculty advisor for this project, Dr. Kristen Carlson at [kristen.carlson@minnstate.edu](mailto:kristen.carlson@minnstate.edu).

Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

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Signature of Parent of Guardian

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Date

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Signature of Researcher

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Date

**Appendix C**

**Data Collection**

<u>Area of the Classroom</u>	<u>Literacy Skill Observed</u>