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## Building Literacy Skills in Preschoolers through Play

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Building Literacy Skills in Preschoolers through Play

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### Abstract

Research in the field of Early Childhood Education supports that young children learn best through play. Many schools in America have taken away play in classrooms and replaced it with academic-based, sedentary learning. The removal of play has resulted in young children displaying more challenging behaviors such as aggression, running, and impulsivity. One challenge facing early childhood educators today is finding ways to incorporate play-based learning in an increasingly academic-based system. This paper synthesized current research on the effects of play-based learning on the development of preschoolers and incorporating play-based teaching methods into literacy instruction for preschoolers. The studies examined overwhelmingly supported using play-based methods to teach literacy skills in preschoolers. Research showed play-based teaching methods positively affected preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills, especially in preschoolers considered to be at-risk of academic failure. Limited research was found on teachers' beliefs of language and literacy development.

*Keywords:* early childhood, literacy instruction, play-based learning, emergent literacy

### Building Literacy Skills in Preschoolers through Play

“Will you play with me?” is a question often asked by children. Children want to play with adult support to gain the skills needed to be successful in life. Language is an essential life skill for children to develop. Language is everywhere, and in everything, humans do, and it is necessary for daily communication. Research indicated that early language and literacy experiences are essential to long-term academic effects (Lonigan, Farver, Phillips, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2011; Lynch, 2011). Heppner (2016) stated that “language skills are the foundation of literacy” (p. 474). Henderson, Many, Wellborn, and Ward (2002) defined literacy as “learning to make meaning of the world” (p. 309). Connor, Morrison, and Slominski (2006) further described early literacy skills as being the “building blocks” for reading and writing (p. 665). Young children learn how to read and write through experiences with oral and written language (Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts, & Benedict, 2007). Language and literacy skills develop more quickly in children through play. To build literacy skills in preschoolers, teachers need to use play-based teaching methods. This paper analyzed current literature on the importance of play on child development, teachers’ beliefs on play-based language and literacy development, emergent literacy skills in preschoolers, and supporting emergent literacy through play in an attempt to answer the following question: In light of early childhood theories, philosophies, and current research in the field regarding best practice, how can preschool teachers build literacy skills through play-based teaching methods?

### Importance of Play on Child Development

Many life skills are learned and developed through play, including social, cognitive, and language skills. Play is a child’s tool for practicing the skills taught, including language and literacy skills. Roskos and Christie (Lynch, 2011) indicated how important play and literacy are

to the development of a child's understanding of the connection between written and oral language. Children engrossed in play can perform at higher skill levels than in more formal settings (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). According to Jerome Bruner, an American psychologist, children can use play to experiment with different behaviors without consequence (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Play, therefore, must be the center of learning in all early childhood classrooms.

However, play is seen more often now as irrelevant, and something children should only do at home (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). With the decrease of play seen in schools, another alarming trend is beginning to surface: higher rates of severe behavioral problems (Miller & Almon, 2009). Children are under more significant amounts of pressure to reach academic expectations that are inappropriate for the developmental level. To further exacerbate the problem, these same children are denied the most beneficial form of stress relief: play (Miller & Almon, 2009). In order for children to develop and succeed academically, play needs to be brought back into the classrooms as a tool for learning.

### **Challenges of Implementing Play-Based Learning**

Not all children may have equal access to early learning opportunities. Research has well-documented the effect of poverty on children's academic skills (Cabell, Justice, Konold, & McGinty, 2011; Lonigan et al., 2011). Socio-economic status has proven to be a reliable predictor of children's reading ability (Cabell et al., 2011). Children who come from low socio-economic status (SES) tend to have lower reading and mathematics skills than peers who come from higher socio-economic status (Lonigan et al., 2011; Rose, Vaughn, & Taylor, 2015). One reason could be the relationship between emergent literacy skills. For example, a developmental weakness in one area of emergent literacy could cascade down to other areas of emergent

literacy. Another reason for this statistic could be the stressors within the environment as well as the exposure of reduced language quality from adults within the community (Cabell et al., 2011). Despite this, some children in low SES have highly developed emergent literacy skills, while others have under-developed skills, which shows a potential need for interventions (Cabell et al., 2011). Research linked play with the foundational skills needed for later success in school, such as memory, self-regulation, and social skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Stegeline, 2005). Rose et al. (2015), indicated the importance of school-to-home partnerships, stating that academic achievement increases when parents and teachers work together.

One of the most prominent challenges teachers face is the vast range of skills children bring to the classroom when entering preschool. Excell and Linington (2011) suggested that developing a pedagogy of play is crucial to a child's overall development. According to Nicolopoulou, Cortina, Ilgaz, Cates, and de Sá (2015), children who engaged in child-centered, play-based activities showed an increase in literacy skills. Best practices in early childhood stress the importance of scaffolding instruction according to the child's current location on the developmental continuum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Although it can be challenging to scaffold instruction for a wide-ranging level of skills in the classroom, teachers must do so. Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (Lynch, 2011), stated that early childhood educators play an essential role in what children learn and how prepared children are for school. Educators that individualize learning opportunities through play are inherently promoting positive learning outcomes and experiences.

### **Teachers' Beliefs on Language and Literacy Development**

Limited research was found on teachers' beliefs about language and literacy development in preschool. The little research found showed significant variability in the literacy environments provided by teachers and schools (Lonigan et al., 2011; Lynch, 2011; Lynch & Owston, 2015). One reason for this could be a result of high academic standards. Teachers may have felt that beliefs about language and literacy development do not matter when there is an expectation to implement developmentally inappropriate standards.

One collective agreement, however, is that teacher beliefs do play a significant role in the literacy development of students (Einarsdottir, 2014; Lynch, 2011; Lynch & Owston, 2015). Connor et al. (2006) explained that instructional strategies such as shared reading, dialogic reading, and play enhance language and early reading skills in young children. Einarsdottir (2014) went further to state that play can provide multiple contexts for promoting literacy, including space to practice reading and writing, opportunities for practicing language skills, and promoting connections between written and oral language.

### **Conclusion**

Emergent literacy skills were found to be essential in early childhood education because these skills are a significant piece of the foundation of later academic success (Lonigan et al., 2011). The use of play to develop literacy skills in preschoolers has been supported by much research (Einarsdottir, 2014; Excell & Linington, 2011; Heppner, 2016; Stegeline, 2005). Play helps develop executive functioning skills such as working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011; Better Kid Care as Penn State, 2012). The development of executive skills throughout childhood fosters greater academic success with impacts into adulthood. Developmental skills such as social and emotional,

cognitive, physical, and language are increased when children are allowed to learn and develop the skills through play. The synthesis of the literature researched in this capstone supports the hypothesis that preschool teachers can build literacy skills through play-based teaching methods.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Research has well-documented the importance of play in a child's life (Ali, Aziz, & Majzub, 2011; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Stegeline, 2005). Play is essential in the overall development of the child (Ali et al., 2011; Norling & Lillvist, 2016). Play was found to help facilitate self-regulation skills and decentering, separate thought from action, impact motivation and help create what Vygotsky defined as the zone of proximal development (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). These essential skills help children learn to think in abstract ways, take on another's perspective, and further develop memory and attention skills. Despite these critical factors, play has been decreasing at alarming rates (Miller & Almon, 2009). This chapter will discuss the importance of play on child development, teachers' beliefs on play-based language and literacy development, emergent literacy skills of preschool children, and supporting emergent literacy through play.

### **Importance of Play on Child Development**

Studies found that play is vital to children's overall healthy development and learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). Some cultures view play as a source of learning, empowerment, creativity, and children's work (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010). Through play, children learn how to socialize with peers, problem-solve, count, and read. Play is an essential aspect of early childhood classrooms because it provides motivation to learn (Einarsdottir, 2014). According to Einarsdottir (2014), play is self-motivating for children and, when educational outcomes are linked to play, children have multiple opportunities to build upon knowledge in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways.

### **Overall Development in Children**

Many theorists, including Piaget and Vygotsky, have described the many developmental benefits of play for children. However, Piaget and Vygotsky have differing views on how children learn language. Vygotsky viewed language development as a social construct, meaning the child learns language based on the environment (Ali et al., 2011; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In contrast, Piaget viewed language attainment as part of a child's cognitive development, meaning language development is related to the child's thinking ability (Ali et al., 2011). Nonetheless, play is a natural learning tool for all children. Ali et al. (2011) conducted a mixed methods research project to determine how play enhances early literacy skills in preschool children. The researchers gathered data through questionnaires and in-class observations of four preschool teachers and 16 preschool children in Malaysia. The results of the research showed that play-based learning helps develop children's attention span, reading skills, and provided more opportunities for children to use language with peers. Play helps children develop social, cognitive, language, and physical skills (Bodrova, 2008; Stegelin, 2005).

**Social/emotional development.** Providing positive social and emotional development to young preschoolers builds a strong foundation for later academic success (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Children who develop positive social and emotional skills as preschoolers grow into older children with a better understanding of one's role in society and the importance of having caring relationships with others (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). This caring, positive attitude is crucial to the success of children later in life. Social play is also critical to language development. When children have access to literacy props and familiar play scenes, language and literacy development increase significantly (Stegelin, 2005). Pretend play, or dramatic play,

strengthens the child's understanding of the world and provides opportunities to socialize with peers about one's experiences with the world.

**Language development.** Language skills are essential in all areas of learning and development. According to Riley and Jones (2007), expressive and receptive language skills are necessary in order to plan and execute play ideas. Children's language skills also help with cooperation, convey perspectives of the world, and allows a chance for children to practice new vocabulary skills (Riley & Jones, 2007). To help expand language development, children need exposure to print-rich environments as well as opportunities for active engagement with peers (Stegelin, 2005). These opportunities can be provided most easily through play. By creating a print-rich classroom, children are more willing to practice vocabulary during play. Children naturally build language skills through play, which results in overall better achievement later in school and life.

**Cognitive development.** Children need ample opportunities to build their cognitive skills. According to Miller and Almon (2009), play skills are more critical to the building of cognitive skills than early reading. When children stay in play scenarios, it tends to allow more time to build motivation and attention, problem-solving, self-regulation, and mental flexibility (Better Kid Care, 2012; Bodrova, 2008). This extended attention in play naturally develops the cognitive functions, which further develops successful students later in school.

Children's brains are continuously growing and restructuring throughout the early years (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). This is important to note because children's early experiences determine how much the brain restructures, which influences behaviors and actions. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011), children with adverse childhood experiences are more likely to display lower executive functioning skills than peers

without adverse experiences. Children who have experienced adversity have a more difficult time developing cognitive skills because the brain has been more focused on a survival state for an extended period. In contrast, children who have developed solid cognitive skills in the preschool years continue to grow and develop those skills in the elementary years.

**Physical development.** The human body needs to move and be physically active in order to stay healthy. However, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has found that children are spending more time in sedentary activities causing childhood obesity rates to increase (Riley & Jones, 2007). Excell and Linington (2011) noted that an overemphasis on paper and pencil activities in the classroom has led to a decrease in movement opportunities for children. According to Stegelin (2005), physical activity in play reduces stress, anxiety, and other mental health and behavioral problems. Children need physical movement to help develop both gross motor and fine motor skills.

According to Erin Friesen, an occupational therapist in the South Washington County School District, children need to develop gross motor skills before developing fine motor skills (Personal Communication, December 3, 2018). Practicing a motor sequence such as frog jump, bear walk, and an alligator crawl develops gross motor skills, which help further develop fine motor skills. Fine motor skills, such as writing and speaking, are more refined and complex. In order for children to be able to write and speak appropriately, they need the proper gross motor movements in place.

Physical development in children is vital for overall development. Research has provided strong evidence linking movement with children's academic learning (Excell & Linington, 2011). For example, preschool-aged children begin to master running from place to place and may begin exhibiting more controlled movements as they suddenly change directions while running.

Motor skills are essential as children get older. The refined movements help the brain develop more fully, allowing for the overall development of the child to become complete.

**Social play.** Play is a very social activity. Children can observe the feelings of peers, express personal feelings, and practice self-regulation skills during play. Children also learn what behaviors are accepted by peers and typically will adjust, or self-regulate, to follow the social norms of peers (Riley & Jones, 2007). During play, children learn how to cooperate, take turns, and follow the rules and expectations. Children have a variety of experiences based on one's culture, home experiences, and language. According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), children need to be able to function in society and work with those whose backgrounds may be different. It is crucial for teachers to understand the cultural, societal, and economic impacts on children's development and to prepare activities that are developmentally appropriate based on those experiences.

**Cultural effects on play.** Research showed that children's play often reflects cultural values (Colliver & Arguel, 2018). According to Izumi-Taylor et al. (2010), culture plays a vital role in how people and other nations view play. In 2010, Izumi-Taylor et al. conducted a comparative study on teachers' perspectives of play between Japan, Sweden, and the United States. The authors surveyed 28 Swedish teachers, 22 American teachers, and 11 Japanese teachers. It was hypothesized that through this research, more insight would be provided regarding the use of play as well as provide an effective design for early childhood programs internationally. The qualitative research found six themes relating to the use of play among the countries: a) process of learning, b) source of possibilities, c) empowerment, d) creativity, e) child's work, and f) fun activities. Three findings resulted from this study: 1) researchers and teachers need to understand play in relation to children's learning, 2) researchers and teachers

need to scrutinize play as a cultural phenomenon, and 3) more knowledge needs to be created about the cultural aspects of play.

The differences in cultural expectations can be difficult for teachers and students. Some cultures expect a more formal education where students are following the teacher's direction, while other cultures expect more child-led learning (Xu, 2010). The United States is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. According to Xu (2010), the United States is no longer considered the "melting pot" because many of the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of its citizens are strongly retained. The values, expectations, and traditions of each culture are being passed down through generations. Research showed that children who speak a language other than English have more difficulty participating in group play and are sometimes not accepted by English-speaking peers (Xu, 2010). More negative social interactions can increase behavioral problems. Encouraging play is vital for children of varying cultures because it allows the expression of culture within the classroom and deepens understanding of other cultures (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010).

Research also suggested that adults can influence the play of children (Colliver & Arguel, 2018). Colliver and Arguel (2018) conducted research to determine how adults can influence play and learning outcomes in children. The participants in the research consisted of 17 four-year-olds, parents, and six educators from a suburban area of Sydney, Australia. The researchers hypothesized that through adult demonstrations of problem-solving activities, children would become naturally interested and engaged in similar activities. The results found that the children tend to become more interested in areas of learning when exposed to them by adults. In order for this learning to take place, however, teachers need to be respectful of all cultures, reflect cultures within the classroom with culturally diverse items, and communicate with parents about culture

(Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010; Xu, 2010). When teachers begin to understand and incorporate a diverse cultural experience in the classroom, students too will begin to understand and become more accepting of other cultures.

***Societal effects on play.*** Society is an ever-present role in life. It impacts not only daily life, but also social interactions with each other. Society has changed dramatically over the past 40 years, and the effects of these changes have had significant implications on early childhood development. For example, technology has increased exponentially with the invention of video games, the internet, and smart tablets. Because of these technological advances, social interactions have decreased (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Xu, 2010). Although technology is useful in the classrooms, teachers need to continue to be intentional in planning social experiences for children as well.

According to Bodrova and Leong (2003), children are spending more time with same-aged peers who may not have the mature play skills needed to help a lesser skilled peer grow and develop. Furthermore, children are being exposed to more academic demands in preschool (Bodrova, 2008; Riley & Jones, 2007). Vivian Paley, an award-winning author and advocate of play, expresses profound concern for the disregard of play in educational settings. According to Paley (Miller & Almon, 2009), even though play is accepted as the work of children, educational institutions are replacing play with academic achievement goals and then blaming children when these expectations are not met. With the ever-increasing demands of academics on young children, teachers need to begin supporting play with the same gusto as academic skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). The reviewed research demonstrated how play experiences will help students develop lifelong social, emotional, and academic skills.

**Environmental play.** Research showed that attitudes towards the environment are formed early in life (North American Association for Environmental Education [NAAEE], 2010). Children need to explore the natural world. According to Ruth Wilson (NAAEE, 2010), environmental education not only develops an appreciation for the natural world, it also develops problem-solving skills and emotional understanding. Children need to explore the world to gain a better understanding of the importance of nature to human life.

Environmental play can be a concern to many adults, especially when there is open water or densely wooded areas. Fraser, Heimlich, and Yocco (2010) studied over 2,000 surveys of adults' beliefs on outdoor play. The results of the surveys were contradictory at times. For example, many adults reported it was important for children to have experiences with nature, but also expressed concern over children playing in and around nature (i.e. waterways, wooded areas, and open fields). Interestingly, the research found that African Americans, Latinos, and Asian/Pacific Islanders considered nature play as less important than Caucasians. On the contrary, Native Americans considered nature play as more important than other races. This study is limited to nature play as it did not address any other form of play. The authors also noted the possibility of supporting nature play as socially acceptable, even if it does not represent the actual behavior of adults.

According to Fraser et al. (2010), there are simple ways to incorporate environmental play, while still keeping children safe. For example, allowing children to play in open spaces (i.e., a field of grass) or playing in a nature preserve can provide the environmental play necessary to build positive attitudes towards the environment while also allowing safe play to remain intact. Environmental play is highly beneficial to the overall development of the child. According to NAAEE (2010), environmental play is mostly child-centered, which allows

children to develop a deeper understanding of hands-on experiences. These experiences will naturally develop higher-level thinking skills, which are essential later on in school.

**Superhero play.** Children are enamored with superheroes. Often, children express desires to be just like Superman, Batman, or the Flash. Superhero play has been a staple in children's lives for decades. According to Boyd (Galbraith, 2007), superhero play involves children using the physical act of play to pretend to be characters with supernatural abilities. Superhero play can be seen both as beneficial for children's development and concerning to children's development. Some concerns raised about superhero play is that it can be aggressive, noisy, and may lead to violence. However, research showed that less than ten percent of superhero play leads to aggression or violence (Galbraith, 2007). Teachers must be able to discern playfighting from real fighting.

Another concern is the difficulty for children to differentiate between reality and fantasy during superhero play (Galbraith, 2007). Research showed that younger children tend to have a difficult time differentiating between fantasy and reality (Galbraith, 2007). However, from the child's perspective, superhero traits are being utilized to better understand one's identity. Understandably, adults expressed concern over superhero play being too violent for children. However, when adults look at superhero play from the child's perspective, a new understanding of superhero play emerges. Adults realized the importance superhero play has on children's social and emotional skills as well as the development of their one's identity while observing the "experts" of play at work. Allowing superhero play in the classroom opens up multiple opportunities for teachers to connect with children about emotions and feelings.

### **Teachers' Beliefs on Play-Based Language and Literacy Development**

Research on teachers' beliefs about language and literacy development in children has shown to vary regarding how children should learn language and how it should be taught (Einarsdottir, 2014; Lynch, 2011; Lynch & Owston, 2015). Teachers' beliefs on language and literacy instruction can have severe implications on the development of language and literacy in young children. Research indicated that children "may be capable of learning more... than they are currently learning" (Lynch and Owston, 2015, p. 92). Lynch and Owston (2015) also indicated that what a teacher believes about literacy best practices can help expand literacy experiences for children in preschool settings.

Lynch and Owston (2015) conducted a quantitative study on teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning of language and literacy. The researchers used "The Preschool Teacher Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire (TBQ) to collect data on 79 preschool teachers. The results of the questionnaire showed much uncertainty among teachers regarding best practice in language and literacy instruction. Teachers' beliefs about oral language instruction were found to be more in-line with research-based best practices, while code-related beliefs were least in-line with research-based best practices. Results also indicated that teachers with less experience tended to have beliefs more aligned with best practices versus teachers with more experience. However, the use of a questionnaire posed several limitations. The researchers found that the code-related subscale had a lower reliability than the other subscales. This could result in inaccurate information. It was also determined that the participant pool became a limitation. The majority of teachers surveyed were within one city and held two-year degrees in early childhood. This is important to note because a larger sample of teachers with more diverse educational levels may provide drastically different results. There is also greater room for misinterpretation of

statements made on questionnaires, especially if the questions are unclear. Overall, the researchers determined that professional programs should examine the beliefs of preschool teachers in the program in order to support teacher change within practice.

In recent years, educators have begun to advocate for educational play, which is planned experiences to integrate play and learning goals (Einarsdottir, 2014). Through educational play, teachers can connect play experiences to learning objectives, and students can practice and develop their skills in a manner that is both goal-oriented and engaging. Einarsdottir (2014) suggested the following three beliefs teachers have about play and learning: a) play is essential to development and learning, b) play is *not* necessary, and c) play is one path towards development and learning. These beliefs can be translated into language and literacy development in children.

For example, if a teacher believed play is not necessary, play may not be offered in the classroom or be seldom offered. If children are not being provided time to practice the skills taught, it may have negative results on how much the children learn regarding language and literacy. This could affect the overall achievement of the children later in school. On the contrary, if a teacher believed play is essential to development and learning, children might be seen in play-based learning activities much of the day. This may show positive results on how much children learn because ample time is provided to practice the skills in a familiar setting.

The new mandatory “National Preschool Curriculum Standards” of Malaysia led Puteh and Ali (2013) to research teachers’ perceptions towards play-based approaches to language and literacy development in preschool in Malaysia. The researchers used questionnaires across various regions of Malaysia. 51 preschool teachers responded to the questionnaire; 12 of which were selected for interviews. The results of the surveys and interviews showed that Malaysian teachers had positive views towards play-based language and literacy development in

preschoolers. However, the teachers expressed concern over allotted time for play activities, limited space for play, and lack of knowledge and skills of developmentally appropriate practices relating to play-based teaching. Results of this study expressed importance of providing teachers with developmentally appropriate practices on the use of play in teaching.

In Australia, primary schools began implementing play-based approaches in early years classrooms to help further young children's language and literacy development. Nolan and Paatsch (2018) researched the challenges teachers faced when implementing a play-based approach to teaching and the consequences it has for teachers' identities. This qualitative study collected data from an Early Years Coordinator and two Foundation teachers from Australia. Researchers collected data through interviews strategically placed throughout the school year as well as two two-hour observations within the classroom. The findings indicated that teachers felt tension the most relating to accountability and legitimacy of play-based teaching. Findings also suggested that more professional development for the implementation of play-based teaching must be provided to teachers.

Research has provided several explanations for why teachers hold certain beliefs on language and literacy development (Lynch & Owston, 2015; Puteh & Ali, 2013). For example, the amount of professional development in the area of language and literacy development or the lack of content in their educational programming could result in varying beliefs on how to best teach literacy skills to preschoolers (Lynch & Owston, 2015). Teachers with two-year degrees have much less time to dedicate to learning best practices, which often leads to a lack of knowledge and skillset, causing teachers to choose teacher-directed instruction instead of play-based teaching methods (Puteh & Ali, 2015).

Teachers' beliefs on language and literacy development may lean towards looking at the development of the whole child versus development in specific content areas (Lynch & Owston, 2015). Some teachers also felt tension with other teachers because of the perceived lack in accountability of a play-based pedagogy within the classroom (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Often, teachers felt the need to validate the play-based pedagogy to colleagues as a legitimate act of teaching and learning (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Teachers also noted the constant pressure to meet developmentally inappropriate standards (Puteh & Ali, 2015). Finally, teachers' beliefs could be based on the curriculum provided or through the challenge of keeping the learning developmentally appropriate (Lynch & Owston, 2015). These explanations provided some insight into why teachers may hold certain beliefs on how preschoolers learn language and literacy.

### **Emergent Literacy Skills in Preschool Children**

Marie Clay first introduced the term *emergent literacy* after a new perspective was discovered on how children develop literacy skills (Wayne et al., 2007). Emergent literacy is defined as reading and writing behaviors that precede conventional literacy (Cabell et al., 2011; Henderson et al., 2002; Wayne et al., 2007). The process of emergent literacy continues until children can read with no difficulties (Norling, Sandberg, & Almqvist, 2015). Research found that preschoolers' emergent literacy skills, particularly in the areas of oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge, have the most considerable significance in how well children will perform in formal reading instruction (Lonigan et al., 2011).

Emergent literacy has roots dating back to two well-known early childhood theorists, Piaget and Vygotsky (Lynch, 2011; Senechal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001). According to Senechal et al. (2001), emergent literacy is considered Piagetian because it

emphasizes a child's discovery of literacy through attempts at reading and writing. Emergent literacy is also considered Vygotskian because it allows children to learn from peers. According to Norling and Lillvist (2016), children begin the process of developing literacy at birth.

According to Cabell et al. (2011), socio-economic status (SES) of children reliably predicts reading ability, thus, it is widely accepted that children from low-SES homes represent the group of children most at risk for later reading difficulties. Cabell et al. (2011) studied the profiles of emergent literacy skills among preschool children at risk for academic difficulties to determine if the assumption of low-SES children being the representative group of children with reading difficulties is accurate. The researchers studied 492 preschool children enrolled in a needs-based program. Assessments were administered to the children on oral language and code-related measures. The researchers also looked at teachers' mid-year data on the literacy skills of children and performance of literacy skills at the end of kindergarten. Findings suggested that children's emergent literacy skills were consistent with children's strengths and weaknesses in performance of emergent literacy. Results validated prior research that children from low-SES backgrounds tend to be considered at-risk for later academic difficulties. However, the findings also indicated systematically individual differences among children regarding emergent literacy skills. The research conducted in this study showed implications to the heterogeneity among children of low-SES and the predictors of later academic success. This finding is important to note because prior research did not attempt to describe children's individual performances. The authors of this research suggested that creating subgroups, as they did, could increase the precision in identifying children needing more intervention.

In 2014, Einarsdottir conducted an action research project in Reykjavik, Iceland to determine how the integration of play and learning correlate with emergent literacy. The

research project was designed as a professional development course, in which the author worked collaboratively with two preschool teachers. Research was collected qualitatively via video recordings, interviews, observations, and diaries written by the teachers. The findings of this research indicated that the teachers became more aware of the value of play on children's learning, which influenced their practices. However, the study revealed that the teachers continued to teach literacy skills at specific times as opposed to integrating it into play. This could be a result of the strong educational traditions in Iceland of separating play and learning.

Children often recognize environmental print before written print. A child can typically identify McDonald's by the "golden arches," Target by the "bullseye," and a stop sign by its shape and color. Research showed that by supporting the development of literacy skills of children in preschool, children will become more successful in reading and writing in the future (Wayne et al., 2007). Educators can support literacy development in preschool children by incorporating literacy elements into everyday routines and in areas of play in the classroom.

### **Supporting Emergent Literacy through Play**

Children develop language and literacy through exposure to environmental print, books, and oral language. It is essential as educators to provide print-rich environments, so students can continue to see and use written language (Wayne et al., 2007). Research showed that by supporting the development of literacy skills in preschool children, children will become more successful in reading and writing in the future (Wayne et al., 2007). Lonigan et al. (2011) indicated that literacy skills are the foundation for children acquiring knowledge in other content areas. Educators can support literacy development in preschool children by incorporating literacy elements into everyday routines and in areas of play in the classroom.

The study conducted by Lonigan et al. (2011) examined how to promote preschool children's emergent literacy skills through a literacy-focused curriculum and two professional development models. The quantitative study was conducted because of a gap in research discovered by the authors regarding the effects of preschool curricula on the skills of at-risk preschool children. Researchers gathered language and literacy data on 739 preschool children attending 48 preschools. The preschools were randomly assigned to the following research designs: business-as-usual (control group), literacy-focused curriculum with workshop-only professional development, or literacy-focused curriculum with workshop and in-class mentoring professional development. Results of the study indicated moderate-to-significant effects on children's literacy outcomes for the curriculum, but nonsignificant effects on children's literacy outcomes for professional development. The findings of the study provided several implications to the field of early childhood education. One implication is that the majority of interventions at-risk children were exposed were not strong enough to close the achievement gap between at-risk and not at-risk children. A second implication is the ongoing debate among the early childhood community regarding best practices in early childhood. The views within the early childhood community are most strongly polarized between direct- and child-led instruction. This study suggested that a balance between intentional and focused teaching strategies be used in order to promote key developmental skills in young children, particularly those considered to be at-risk of academic difficulty.

Norling and Lillvist (2016) conducted research on literacy-related play activities and how teachers can support children's language and concept development. Six Swedish preschools were chosen for the research and data was collected from video material. The choice of data collection held a high risk of presenting bias from the teachers and students. Having a camera in

the classroom could have caused the teachers or students to react or behave differently. Despite this limitation, results showed that a variety of play, including spontaneous play, dramatic play, and adult- or child-initiated play supported children's concept development. Furthermore, access to toys or other objects provided a multitude of literacy-related play opportunities for children. However, these items were not found to be sufficient for literacy-related play without adult support. The authors provided serious implications on the importance of teachers' timing in communication and interaction with children and the overall concept development of children.

Lynch (2011) examined the role of print literacy within preschool classrooms in central Canada. The author interviewed and observed seven preschool teachers. From the data, three categories of print literacy emerged: 1) availability and engagement of books, 2) writing engagement, 3) print displays and materials. Results of the study indicated that despite the many similarities found among classrooms regarding type of print and engagement, the teachers' beliefs and practices varied significantly. For example, many preschool teachers claimed book shares were important to literacy development, but this activity was seldom seen within the classroom. This could be a result of inexperience of teachers or uncertainty on how to scaffold children's learning. Print within play areas was also seldom seen by the researcher. One reason provided for this was that teachers did not believe children learned about print when engaged with play. However, prior research suggested that children learn a significant amount of print when print is integrated into play areas. The author suggested professional development on literacy development in children for early childhood educators. In addition to the professional development, there also needs to be integration of teachers' beliefs.

### **Classroom Environment**

Research found five categories related to classroom environment: a) resources available to children, b) room organization, c) behavioral expectations of children, d) types of experiences provided, and e) teacher interactions (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Research suggested that through increased frequency of engagement in literacy behaviors, language and literacy development will improve in preschool children (Wayne et al., 2007). Meaningful literacy experiences need to be offered in multiple areas of the classroom because children do not always frequent the same areas of the room. By providing literacy exposure to every area of the classroom, children are given opportunities to engage in literacy activities throughout the day.

Norling et al. (2015) studied the effects of children's engagement and emergent literacy practices on the development of emergent literacy. The participants consisted of 55 Swedish preschools in three urban areas. 188 teachers participated, 165 of whom were selected for classroom observations. The results of this study found that a positive classroom environment along with instructional learning formats and language modeling were the most significant to children's engagement in early literacy practices. The results of the study also indicated that children's engagement in the classroom directly correlated with the teachers' activities. One significant limitation discussed by the authors is the constant turnover among children and teachers. Preschool children and teachers alike often come and go. Due to the ebb-and-flow nature of preschools, the researchers suggested a follow-up to this study in order to determine if the results would vary or remain the same.

Teacher-child interaction in play areas is critical to language and literacy development in children. According to Nolan and Paatsch (2018), teachers need to be present in an area of play in order to "hook" children into that area of play. Once children enter the play activity, teachers

are then able to help facilitate language and literacy development within that play sequence. Research also suggested adding books to learning areas, adding a listening center, and introducing literacy props such as pretend "reading glasses" to encourage literacy interaction (Einarsdottir, 2014; Wayne et al., 2007). It is also important to introduce any new items placed in learning areas, so children are aware of the new items as well as the expectation of the item's use.

### **Instructional Strategies**

Educators need to consider the relationship between instructional strategies and the development of language and literacy in preschool children. According to Connor et al. (2006), literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and decoding can predict later reading and academic success. Research showed that different instructional strategies provide better results in specific areas of literacy development (Connor et al., 2006). Several different forms of instructional strategies can be used in a classroom.

**Teaching methods.** Educators can choose to use a teacher-directed method, a child-directed method, or a combination of the two methods. All three strategies were shown to have positive effects on vocabulary growth in preschoolers; however, the combination of teacher- and child-directed also increased alphabet and letter-word growth (Connor et al., 2006). Although any of these instructional strategies can support language and literacy growth, research showed stronger evidence towards a balance of teacher- and child-directed learning (Connor et al., 2006; Lonigan et al., 2011).

Educators also have the choice of using explicit or implicit instruction. Research showed that language acquisition appeared to be implicitly learned through "interactions with others" (Connor et al., 2006, p. 683). Implicit instruction could be in the form of play itself or shared

reading, where students are interacting with the book. In contrast, literacy skills appeared to be taught best through explicit instruction. Explicit instruction could include read-alouds or rhyming games. Teachers need to use a mixture of implicit and explicit instruction to successfully teach language and literacy skills in children.

The third option for educators is to utilize whole group or small group instruction. Both instructional strategies showed to be positively related to growth in alphabet and word-letter recognition (Connor et al., 2006). However, research also suggested that whole group meaning-focused activities may have a more significant positive effect on growth in complex vocabulary and syntax because it provides more opportunities for students to interact with each other in meaningful ways (Connor et al., 2006). Although it emerged through research that any form of instructional strategies will have a positive outcome on language and literacy growth, research indicated that a mixture of strategies is best, depending on the outcome desired.

**Prop boxes.** One suggestion provided by researchers is the use of prop boxes that relate to the current theme in the room (Einarsdottir, 2014; Wayne et al., 2007). Children who had the opportunity to be involved in the process of gathering play materials showed a significantly higher rate of interaction with the materials (Einarsdottir, 2014). Gathering real-world items such as cereal boxes, empty ice cream containers, and unused pizza boxes into "prop boxes" to use during play can increase a child's oral and written language (Einarsdottir, 2014). By utilizing real-world items during play, the children also showed an increase in oral and written language. According to Einarsdottir (2014), the prop boxes helped "stimulate written as well as spoken language in a goal-directed way" (p. 101).

Having prop boxes and print-rich environments are only as effective as the teacher's support of these items in the classroom, however. Wayne et al. (2007) provided four strategies

for teachers to support literacy play in the classroom: a) invite children to play, b) model use of props, c) encourage use of props, and d) give praise to those engaging in props. Having a teacher physically in the play space with the students allows the students to practice their skills with adult support before trying the skills independently with peers. Adult support was shown to increase literacy-related play in children, which can lead to successful reading in the future (Einarsdottir, 2014; Wayne et al., 2007).

**Storytelling and story acting (STSA).** Research showed that language and literacy development in preschool children can be increased by incorporating STSA into the daily routine of the classroom (Heppner, 2016; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) researched the effects of narrative and play-based activities on preschool children's oral language, emergent literacy, and social competence. Specifically the researchers examined the effects of STSA on the three language skills previously mentioned. 149 low-income preschool children from seven preschool classrooms, one of which was the control room, participated in the study. Children in the study were pre-tested and post-tested on 11 measures, including narratives, vocabulary, emergent literacy, pretend play abilities, cooperation within peer play, and self-regulation. Results of the study indicated that STSA improved narrative comprehension, print and word concepts, pretend play abilities, and self-regulation. Positive results were further strengthened when participation in STSA was more frequent among children. Implications of this study indicate that STSA can be a contributing factor to the promotion of learning, development, and school readiness for low-income preschool children.

Heppner (2016) also studied the effects of STSA on emergent literacy skills among preschool children. The study was conducted between February and March of 2015 in a Canadian preschool, where 20 children were enrolled. One limitation immediately noticed in

this study was the limited amount of time children were in the classroom. The children attended half-days Mondays and Wednesdays. This is important to note because if the children attended full day, the results may be significantly altered. The findings of the study determined that all areas of a balanced literacy approach were fostered through STSA. Research also indicated that STSA can be a useful instructional practice for early childhood educators.

According to Heppner (2016), the STSA strategy incorporates all six elements of balanced literacy: oral language, narrative form, conventions of print, code, word study, and reading for meaning (p. 461). Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) found that children who participated in STSA activities showed improvement in comprehension, print awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to engage in pretend play. The STSA structure is an exemplary illustration of a child-centered, play-based approach to early childhood education (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Sharing a child's story with other children in the classroom has also been shown to build a common culture within the classroom, which in turn, motivates children to participate (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). It is also crucial for students to be able to see their story visually. As Heppner (2016) explained, "connecting dialogue... to physical actions assists children in internalizing the nuances of language" (p. 474). A child who can "see" the story acted out will become motivated to tell more elaborate stories, naturally increasing their language and literacy development.

### **Family Involvement**

Play was shown to be an intrinsic motivator in early learning (Colliver & Arguel, 2018). However, adults often desire to control children's play, which derails the purpose of play. Adults often use children's play to foster adult-guided learning, but sometimes look to children's teachers for support in teaching academics (Colliver & Arguel, 2018; Rose et al., 2015). Teachers need to be open to assisting parents while also being sensitive to parents' needs.

Teachers can gently encourage parental involvement by offering opportunities to practice language and literacy skills with children.

Rose et al. (2015) conducted an action research project to determine if family participation of literacy-related activities affected children's language and literacy development. Rose and colleagues conducted this mixed methods research within Rose's preschool classroom using observations, assessments, and artifacts. The project took approximately one year to complete. Findings revealed student language increased after participating in a program focused on student's backgrounds, families, and interests. The researchers found that parental support was a key factor in the success of educational improvements among children. Although this may not be a major implication of the research, it is a reminder to teachers that partnerships with parents are crucial to children's success in school. Research also indicated that preschool programs that encourage parental involvement in addition to providing developmentally appropriate literacy practices provide children with a multitude of opportunities for early academic and social growth.

**Lending libraries.** Teachers can support parents in helping children improve academically by offering a classroom lending library (Rose et al., 2015). Offering classroom books for use at home provides the students access to "school favorites" at home. It also provides parents with the opportunity to read high-quality literature with children.

**Literacy events.** Teachers can also provide literacy-focused events for parents and family members to attend. Literacy events encourage families to become involved with children's school, while simultaneously supporting language and literacy development in children (Rose et al., 2015). Literacy events can take place inside or outside of school. Some

literacy events can consist of attending a library reading time or enjoying literacy activities in the classroom.

**Conferences.** Finally, the most crucial way to help parents support children's learning is through regular conferences. Communication is a critical component in increasing literacy skills in children (Rose et al., 2015). By discussing children's learning and growth with parents, teachers can build positive relationships with parents. Rose et al. (2015), suggested that there may be a correlation between parent conferences and academic growth in children. Although conferences in preschool may not appear to affect a child's academic growth immediately, it may still affect academic growth long-term.

### **Conclusion**

Play should be seen as complementary to work rather than opposition to it (Miller & Almon, 2009). In order for children to truly develop to the highest potential, children need as many opportunities as possible for play in the early years. Play, although often seen as a source of fun, is also a source of growth and development for children. During play, children are learning about the world and how one can fit into it (Bodrova, 2008; Stegeline, 2005). Play allows children to gain new information and integrate it into the daily schema of how the world works (Ali et al., 2011; Bodrova, 2008; Stegeline, 2005). Children enter school with a variety of cultures and backgrounds. For some students, it is the very first school experience. Others may speak a second language, causing a barrier with peers and learning. No matter how many backgrounds are present in a classroom, one universal language is known to all children: play. Children enjoy playing. Play is a natural way for children to develop a better understanding of the world while simultaneously growing in overall development (Ali et al., 2015; Nolan &

Paatsch, 2018). Therefore, play must be an integral part of a child's early learning experiences.

The following chapter will provide a summary and conclusion to the literature review.

### Chapter Three: Summary and Conclusion

Young children enter preschool to learn how to self-regulate, communicate in appropriate ways with others, cooperate with peers, and navigate body awareness (Ali et al., 2011). Play is a natural tool used by children to develop social-emotional, language, cognitive, and physical skills. However, schools have increased academic-based learning and simultaneously decreased play-based learning in classrooms (Miller & Almon, 2009). The increased demand of academics in preschool has caused strain and tension among teachers. School leaders and teachers must consider the available research on developmentally appropriate practices and best practices in literacy instruction for early childhood education in order to answer the question: In light of early childhood theories, philosophies, and current research in the field regarding best practice, how can preschool teachers build literacy skills through play-based teaching methods? School decisionmakers should reflect on the effectiveness of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms pertaining to the importance of play on child development, teachers' beliefs about language and literacy development, emergent literacy skills in preschoolers, and how to support those skills.

#### **Importance of Play on Child Development**

Research found play to be a vital component to the development of social and emotional, language, cognitive, and physical skills in young children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). The development of language skills also improved through play because children had ample opportunities to utilize environmental print, practice new vocabulary, and express wants and needs to peers. Play assisted the development of cognitive functions such as attention, problem-solving, and self-regulation because children practiced rule-following, turn taking, and cooperation. Physical development also benefited from play activities because it strengthened

the gross and fine motor skills of children. The presence of physical activity in the classroom showed to reduce stress and anxiety in children (Stegelin, 2005).

Cultural and societal values are often reflected within children's play. Izumi-Taylor et al. (2010) discovered that play was perceived to assist the development of learning, empowerment, and creativity. Interestingly, play is viewed differently among cultures. The United States was built on the premise of multiple cultures molding together. Teachers' understanding of multiple cultural perspectives of play held significant importance to play-based learning within the classroom. Society's expectation of play has also changed in recent decades. Although society accepts play as a child's work, play is being replaced with more rigorous and academic-focused classrooms (Bodrova, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). Bodrova and Leong (2003) urged teachers to support play with the same fervor as academic skills.

The most controversial forms of play researched were environmental play and superhero play. The importance of environmental play varied among cultures. Research showed that environmental play assisted with the development of higher-level thinking, problem-solving, and emotional understanding in young children (Fraser et al., 2010). Despite the overall acknowledgement of the importance of environmental play, some cultures raised concerns over allowing children to play among nature. Superhero play was also found to be contradictory within the research (Galbraith, 2007). The adults noted the social-emotional benefits of superhero play as well as the consequences, such as children being seriously injured during play sequences. However, the presence of superhero play is not new because superheroes have been part of children's lives for decades.

### **Teachers' Beliefs about Play-Based Language and Literacy Development**

Teachers' beliefs about play-based language and literacy development were found to vary and at times were contradictory to best practices. Research found that teachers' beliefs on play-based language and literacy development can have serious implications within the classroom (Lynch & Owston, 2015). For example, activity choices available to children and teachers' encouragement of exploration were affected by teachers' beliefs (Lynch, 2011). Teachers' beliefs on play-based language and literacy development varied between play being a vital role in children's learning and play being unnecessary to children's learning (Einarsdottir, 2014). Despite the fact that many teachers understood the value of play-based teaching, several common concerns regarding play-based teaching were discovered among teachers, including limited time allotted for play, lack of space, and lack of developmentally appropriate practices. Other factors which influenced teachers' beliefs included the amount of professional development on play-based language and literacy development, amount of experience teaching in a preschool setting, tension among teachers and other colleagues regarding use of play-based teaching, and the increasing pressure of academic-based learning.

Reasons for the variations of teachers' beliefs on play-based language and literacy development were addressed in some of the research. Some teachers expressed frustration towards the lack of professional development around play-based learning. Others felt tied to the curriculum provided. Teachers with less experience felt a stronger push towards academic-based learning and resorted to teacher-led activities. Traditions were also found to play a significant role in teachers' beliefs. For example, the educational system in Iceland has always separated play and learning (Einarsdottir, 2014). The Icelandic teachers continued to separate play from learning, despite seeing the benefits of integrating play with learning.

### **Emergent Literacy Skills in Preschoolers**

Emergent literacy skills were found to be most commonly defined as reading and writing habits developed prior to the formal development of conventional literacy. Children's emergent literacy skills began developing as early as birth and continued until proficient reading began. The most significant emergent literacy skills found to support later reading success were oral language, phonological awareness, and print awareness. Research found that children develop emergent literacy skills through environmental print, oral language, and access to books (Lynch, 2011).

Research also found a strong link between reading success and socio-economic status (SES) of children (Cabell et al., 2011; Lonigan et al., 2011). Overall development of emergent literacy skills was found to be lower in children from low SES backgrounds, however, individual differences among the emergent literacy skills of children varied. Differentiated instruction (i.e. variety of teaching methods) was found to be the most desirable in teaching emergent literacy skills in children from low SES backgrounds (Cabell et al., 2011). Lonigan et al. (2011) determined the most influential source of developing emergent literacy skills in young children was through a combination of intentional and focused teaching strategies, but play was never mentioned as a successful tool for emergent literacy development.

### **Supporting Emergent Literacy Skills through Play**

Research showed that many factors influenced the support of emergent literacy skills including environmental print, dramatic play spaces, books, and toys or other objects (Lynch, 2011). Children became more successful in reading and writing when supported in the development of literacy skills in preschool. Emergent literacy skills were found to be best supported through play when adult support was provided. Adults best supported emergent

literacy skills in children through the environment of the classroom, instructional strategies used, and encouragement of family involvement.

Research found that children tend to frequent a variety of play spaces within the classroom (Wayne et al., 2007). Classrooms that included print in all areas of play including dramatic play, block play, and art, increased the literacy development of children. In addition, teacher-child interactions were found to be a significant factor in the language and literacy development of children. Instructional strategies were found to vary significantly, however, research found that a variety of instructional strategies used in the classroom provided the best results for literacy development among children (Wayne et al., 2007). Instructional strategies included a variety of teaching methods, utilization of prop boxes, and storytelling and story acting. Encouragement of family involvement also provided positive results for growth of language and literacy development among children. Family involvement varied between in-home and at-school events such as lending libraries and conferences.

### **Conclusion**

Play, although often seen as a source of fun, is also a source of growth and development for children. During play, children are learning about the world and how to fit into it (Bodrova, 2008; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Play allows children to gain new information and integrate it into the daily schema of how the world works (Riley & Jones, 2007; Stegelin, 2005). Even though many adults express an understanding of the importance of play in young children's lives, the amount of time children receive for play is decreasing. One of the biggest concerns regarding decreasing play time for children is the amount of inappropriate expectations placed on young children. Research indicated that a typical day in kindergarten is comprised of a significantly higher amount of literacy and math instruction than "free play" (Miller & Almon,

2009). The high academic expectations caused teachers to feel undue pressure, which resulted in play time decreasing for children. Children who spend an average of 30 minutes in free time a day during a six-hour school day are receiving two and a half hours a week in developmentally appropriate learning. It should be no wonder that children are exhibiting severe behavioral problems given the sheer amount of developmentally inappropriate activities.

According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), play is fundamentally important for preschool learning and development. Vygotskians argue that play is considered the leading activity for young children (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Through play, children learn the skills needed to develop cognition, language, executive functioning, physical, and socioemotional skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Vygotsky (Bodrova, 2008) exemplified the importance of play in preschool and kindergarten when he stated that the quality of play in preschool and kindergarten was a greater predictor of later academic success.

Play also needs to be viewed in multiple perspectives, especially play that may appear to be rough, such as superhero play. Adults often view play differently than children. Children tend to choose more physical play, such as superhero play, because it allows the practice of different identities and gives children a chance to feel powerful (Galbraith, 2007). Cultural differences of children can be difficult for teachers to navigate. Because of the increasing diversity within early childhood programs, it is important that teachers do not generalize the social aspects of play (Xu, 2010). Instead, teachers need to consider multiple perspectives of play based on the cultures, languages, and backgrounds of students. Children who feel connected to the classroom, teachers, and peers, are more willing to take risks in play. Taking

risks in play aids children in learning more about self, peers, and the world. Play should be at the center of learning in all early childhood classrooms.

## Chapter Four: Discussion and Application

Children are innately curious on how things work, why things happen, and if there is a way they can manipulate objects to create a different outcome. This curiosity begins in infancy when children realize they have arms and legs that they can control, they will be fed or diapered when they cry, and that if an object drops on the floor it will get picked up by someone else. As children get older, their curiosities continue to grow and develop. Through play, children are able to integrate new information and knowledge and further deepen their cognitive understanding (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). According to Vygotskians, children perform ahead of themselves during play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Children use play to explore their curiosities and wonderings of the world around them. This chapter will discuss how the research reviewed can inform instructional practice, the limitations of the studies reviewed, and three opportunities for additional research.

### **How Research Can Inform Instructional Practice**

Despite the barriers to providing play-based teaching, there are several ways in which the pre-K to third grade system can change in order to support a play-based teaching model in all early childhood classrooms. The first change that needs to take place is redefining the word “play”. What exactly is play? What does it look like? How can it support children’s academic skills? The second way the educational system can support play-based teaching is by incorporating academics into the children’s play. The final, and potentially most arguable way the educational system needs to change, is by understanding how executive functioning skills are developed and providing training to teachers and other staff members on how to develop executive function skills in young children.

**Redefining Play**

Society often defines play as “irrelevant”, a “mindless activity”, and a luxury for children as opposed to a necessity for their development and learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). However, research shows the critical importance of play on a child’s development and growth (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). One way for society to understand, and potentially fully embrace, the idea of play-based teaching is to redefine the term ‘play’.

According to Vygotsky, play is not spontaneous; rather, true play has three components: child-created imaginary situation, children take on and act out roles, and children follow a set of rules (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). When children are engaged in mature play, they are able to use object substitutions, take on roles and responsibilities, and follow the rules associated with the play (Bodrova, 2008). Through mature play, students are able to continue developing their executive functioning skills. When they are able to practice executive functioning skills in a non-confrontational way, they are better able to internalize those behaviors and use them in other appropriate situations such as circle time, the library, or a restaurant.

**Understanding and Developing Executive Function Skills in Children**

Children have a difficult time with executive functioning skills such as self-control, planning, and ignoring distractions. However, it is a popular misconception that these skills will naturally mature over time (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). These skills take time to develop and grow. The experiences a child has in life certainly provide a foundation for the executive function skills they will develop; however, children need time and support to truly develop these skills effectively. This can be done in the classroom by providing ample opportunities to remember the classroom rules, practice controlling emotions, practicing

sitting still and focusing attention (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). Research has found that play has provided positive effects on many of these foundational skills and cognitive activities (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Children who are offered time to play, build deeper cognitive and executive functioning skills, which are necessary to success in life.

Educators can further promote the development of executive function skills in children by using tools and strategies they already have. For example, allowing children to plan play and reflect on play helps build executive function skills because planning and reflecting require higher levels of thinking and focus (Better Kid Care, 2012). Another critical skill children need to be able to practice is working and thinking out loud (Better Kid Care 2012). Children who engage in conversation with each other or engage in self talk, are provided opportunities to organize a plan for play as well as allowing for a deeper level of working memory.

If students are struggling to remember what to do next or how the plan was meant to go, teachers can provide mediators such as a visual schedule or action as a reminder. This can be seen in the dramatic play area with children wearing “roleplay badges”. The visual on the badge reminds children which role to act out in the dramatic play area. Teachers also need to be able to observe and notice when children need more individualized help in learning. Teachers should scaffold children’s learning when children struggle with play sequences (Better Kid Care, 2012). This can be done by providing adult assistance to children in the form of modeling how to play in the dramatic play area or block area, or breaking down complex ideas into smaller, more manageable ones. The goal of scaffolding is to support the children when needed, while slowly taking that support away until children are able to successfully do the work independently.

### **Incorporating Academic Skills into Play**

Teachers may argue that play and academics need to be separated. However, research shows that separating the two causes a negative outcome that is detrimental for the children (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Although integrating academics may first appear to be a near impossible task, it can be done. When integration of play and academics is successful, student learning becomes successful. Through play, children are able to practice and increase their knowledge and skills. According to Heidemann and Hewitt (2010) and Bodrova (2008), children develop skills in all domains of learning through play, including: communication, social and emotional, cognitive, physical, self-regulation, and academic. However, children need adult assistance and guidance in order to successfully learn these skills. Educators and caregivers need to ensure the environment is set up appropriately, observe the students regularly in their play, model mature play when necessary, and scaffold the learning for each child (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). When the appropriate steps have been taken to ensure a safe and developmentally enriching environment is in place, academic learning will be able to take place in a more manageable way.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations were discussed within the research. Much research was conducted with extremely small participant pools, some as low as two teachers (Einarsdottir, 2014; Rose et al., 2015). A small participant pool limits the results of the studies significantly because there are fewer cases to study and compare. A second significant limitation to the research was the length of time to conduct the studies. Some researchers, such as Colliver and Arguel (2015), spent as little as four weeks conducting research. The lack of time allotted to conduct the research is significant because the results may not show true accuracy. Research conducted on

interventions, curricula, or professional development might show more accurate results if it is done for a much longer period of time; perhaps a year or more.

A third limitation found within research related to the methodology used to conduct the research. Some of the researchers chose to use questionnaires as the main source of information for the study. Questionnaires are not always reliable because the statements or questions can be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Lynch and Owston (2015) note this limitation and suggest rephrasing questions or statements in a more clear and concise way to eliminate misinterpretations. Other observational methods also pose limitations. Norling and Lillvist (2016) note the high potential of bias in video recordings. Simply having a camera in the classroom may alter the behaviors of the children and staff. This is a significant limitation because if the children and staff show altered behavior, the results of the study should not be considered accurate. One way to change this limitation is to place a camera out of eyesight of the children and staff.

Continuous turnover of children and staff is another potential limitation to studies. Norling et al. (2015) note that children and staff are constantly changing. Children move up within the educational system and teachers may leave the school due to a change in position, retirement, or termination. This limitation is significant to note because it shows that studies conducted within preschools cannot be solely based on one or two observations. Authentic assessment over time and over multiple classrooms will determine fidelity, accuracy, and stability of the research being conducted.

### **Opportunities for Additional Research**

The research conducted for this capstone led to several opportunities for additional research. First, research on how parents' literacy skills affect the literacy skills of children

would be beneficial not only to the understanding of language and literacy development in children but also to ECE as a profession. It would be important from a research standpoint to determine if parents' literacy skills are reflected in the children or if parents are more intentional about developing language and literacy skills in their children. Second, it would be of importance to research which, if any, specific literacy interventions are successful with children considered to be at-risk for academic failure. This research would also include the effects of specific literacy interventions used. Some of the research reviewed included specific literacy curricula. However, researching intervention tools could prove to be useful to the field of ECE and the language development of children. Finally, it would be noteworthy to conduct research on the effects of play-based language and literacy in children beyond preschool. Research has shown that play is the most beneficial way for preschool children to learn (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). A longitudinal study regarding the effects of play-based language and literacy development with children through elementary school could provide more insight into the effects of play-based education.

### **Conclusion**

Children are eager to learn and want to know the how's, what's, and why's of the world. Children utilize play to develop a deeper understanding of the world. According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), play is the leading activity of young children. Vygotsky argued that play does not simply reflect a child's current development level, but rather, play helps propel children's development forward (Bodrova, 2008). Play is how children learn and develop executive functioning skills, cognitive skills, and social skills. Play, however, is not valued in most societies as being a necessary component in the classroom (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). This perspective on play has been documented by the alarming rate of

decreasing play time in early childhood classrooms and increasing academic skill development (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Play may be seen as a luxury to many societies due to a lack of understanding the definition of play.

Vygotsky limited his definition of play to dramatic play (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Through dramatic play, children are expected to create an imaginary situation, delegate and play out roles, and follow the rules of play (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Although these tasks may seem simple to most adults, it is very taxing work on the child because it is enhancing the development of the child's executive functioning skills. Teachers need to observe and notice when these skills are being developed and take extra caution to ensure the skills are being developed appropriately.

Teachers can utilize many tools to assist in the development of a child's executive function through play. Teachers can assist in scaffolding the play, use mediators, help students plan and reflect on play, and allow children to express thoughts out loud (Better Kid Care, 2012). Early childhood teachers that foster creative play experiences through scaffolding support more in-depth learning and maturity in play skills that "positively impact not only the development of play itself, but also the development of early academic skills" (Bodrova, 2008, p. 367). Research shows that play helps the child develop skills in all domains of learning (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Play, therefore, is a necessity for the development of children.

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