

6-25-2022

## How can a play-based curriculum foster social and emotional self-regulation skills in early childhood classrooms?

Kalei Stephens  
stephenk1@csp.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education\\_masters](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education_masters)



Part of the [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), and the [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stephens, K. (2022). *How can a play-based curriculum foster social and emotional self-regulation skills in early childhood classrooms?* (Thesis, Concordia University, St. Paul). Retrieved from [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education\\_masters/80](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education_masters/80)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education & Humanities at DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Teacher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csp.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csp.edu).

# HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

How can a play-based curriculum foster social and emotional self-regulation skills in early  
childhood classrooms?

Kalei Stephens

Concordia University, St. Paul

ED 590 Research and Complete Capstone

Instructor: Dr. Kelly Sadlovsky

Second Reader: Laura Ahonen

June 18, 2022

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	4
Chapter One: Introduction .....	5
Topic and Scope of the Problem .....	6
Importance of Topic .....	7
Definition of Terms .....	8
Conclusion .....	9
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature .....	10
Defining Play-based Learning .....	10
Benefits of Play .....	12
Natural Occurrence of Play .....	14
Teachers' Role in Supporting Play .....	15
Developmental Theorists on Play-based Learning .....	17
Vygotsky .....	18
Social/Emotional Development in Early Childhood Education .....	20
Development of Emotional Regulation in Play .....	21
Development of Self-regulation in play .....	25
Self-regulation and Play-based Curriculums .....	28

	3
HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM	
Play in the Classroom .....	31
Language Development .....	31
Teachers' Role in Implementing Play .....	32
Tools of the Mind Curriculum .....	33
Conclusion .....	35
Chapter Three: Discussions/Applications/Future Studies .....	37
Summary of Insights .....	37
Application of Research .....	38
Making Play First .....	39
Advocating for Play .....	40
Future Studies .....	41
Conclusion .....	43
References .....	45

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### Abstract

Play is an essential aspect in the early childhood years, especially during the years of preschool and kindergarten when children's social and emotional skills are developing rapidly (Denham et al., 2012; Kangas et al., 2015; Kroll, 2017). Even though play is an essential part, allowing children to partake in pretend play during school hours has decreased tremendously due to the push of academics within the school (Aras, 2015). With the rising importance of play as part of the curriculum, there have been previous studies and research explaining the why and the benefits of play and how play has allowed children to develop self-regulation skills needed for later school and life success (Aras, 2016; Ashiabi, 2005; Kroll, 2017). Lifter et al. (2011) pointed out that allowing children to partake in pretend or symbolic play, allowed children different opportunities to develop self-regulation skills. More researchers have concluded, that play has shown improvement in the development of self-regulation skills amongst preschool-aged children (Savina, 2014; Slot et. al., 2017; Lillard et. al., 2012). The nature of this research and literature review is to emphasize the importance of a play-based curriculum with a focus on developing social and emotional regulation within early childhood educational settings. This paper focused on analyzing and synthesizing research findings to inform practices for early childhood practitioners on curricula that support healthy development in preschool and kindergarten students.

*Keywords:* play-based curriculum, early childhood education (ECE), self-regulation, child development, pedagogy, children's play

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

Throughout the changing years and focus of school-related subjects, preschool and kindergarten classrooms have both become a topic for teachers and parents alike regarding the push for academic overplay. Educators and parents are both seeing a push for academics over play within the preschool and kindergarten classrooms due to the alarming factor of making academics the sole focus of a school setting. However, with research on play, play-based curriculums, teacher involvement, and how play benefits children, educators are starting to fall back on the idea of enforcing a play-based classroom (Slot et al., 2017; Kroll, 2017; Bodrova et al., 2013). Research from Montroy et al. (2016), Kangas et al. (2015), and Denham et al. (2012) all bring awareness to how teachers and early childhood educators (ECE) can create a play-focused classroom that also allows children to learn both academics, as well as social/emotional skills such as self-regulation. Research throughout the last few years, have all stated the same in regards to teachers not knowing how to participate in play due to the focus on academics and lack of training/curriculum development on play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Broekhuizen et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2014).

Play, as well as academics, can both play a vital role in the development of self-regulation skills for preschool and kindergarten children. For children to succeed later in life, children must be able to understand and use emotions correctly. When children understand how to regulate the different types of emotions it allows students to not only be “socially acceptable” and allow friendships to form but also succeed in academics and be prepared for the future (Kroll, 2017; Savina, 2014). Play is essentially a safe place for children to practice social and emotional skills without the judgment of teachers or other adults. With this information, teachers and educators should be equipped with curriculums and resources on how to adapt the

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

classrooms and allow for play and a socio-emotional-based classroom (Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Kroll 2017).

Play is an inviting place for children to learn and revisit material that might have challenged the child during the lesson. With the benefits of a play-based and play-centered classroom, teachers would be able to set up the classrooms to allow for centers of play learning to increase understanding and retain knowledge taught during the lessons (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). A study done by Lifter et al. (2011) elaborated on the rising push for academics and the demands the states/government have on pushing for academics and scorning the curriculums that emphasize play. The importance of a play-based curriculum is that it focuses on the child and allows the child to be the leader in the learning goals (Lifter et al., 2011). The research has indicated that when used appropriately, the play-based curriculum can lead to higher reading levels achieved by students, social/emotional regulation skills, and an improvement in social interaction skills (Lifter et al., 2011; Gayler & Evans, 2011; Slot et al., 2017; Kroll, 2017)

### **Topic and Scope of the Problem**

Preschool and kindergarten students are constantly being faced with inappropriate and unreasonable expectations that for the longest time were set for students entering the first grade (Slot et al., 2017). With the increasing rise of academics, students are being forced to meet academic demands that are causing the student(s) to lose sight of other important traits such as those self-regulation and social interaction skills (Miller & Almon, 2009; Montroy et al., 2016). Due to the rise of academics and standards set across the board, teachers have had to decide on decreasing and or eliminating the time the children had for play due to making time for academics. With this increasing push for academics, teachers, and educators of the early childhood education community have shown an emphasis on advocating and researching a play-

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

based curriculum that promotes the development of self-regulation skills along with academics in preschoolers and kindergartners (Aras, 2016; Ashiabi, 2005; Kroll, 2017; Bordova et al., 2013; Slot et al., 2017; Bordova, 2008).

Although some administrators and state standards downcast the importance of play and the importance within the classroom, when used correctly play-based learning can allow children to learn both social and academic skills needed to succeed in school (Kroll, 2017; Lillard et al., 2013; Nilsson, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2018). The students can increase sense of awareness and build within the student's zone of proximal development to understand key concepts at the level that makes the most sense to that student (Nilsson, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2018; Vygotsky, 1967). Early childhood classrooms should be able to encompass a child's self of wonder and imagination while also imparting academic skills needed to grow in school. When this is done correctly both measures can be accounted for.

As Vygotsky has stated, children when in play almost play a head above the average norm meaning when children are engaging in play, the children are acting at a level that is above the level which is normal because it is a safe and inviting play for the child (Vygotsky, 1967). Likewise, Froebel's view supports the development and growth of children's social, cognitive, and emotional development. This line of thinking produces children who are confident with handling the different emotions, understand social cues, learn how to adapt to different settings, and create a lifelong foundation of skills needed for later school and life success (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

### **Importance of the Topic**

From the research studies that have been conducted, it is becoming a more prominent issue in how play-based curriculums foster the development of social/emotional learning in early



## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

preschool and kindergarten students. Milda Bredikyte et al. (2015) explained that there is growing evidence within the study of play-based learning that suggests high-quality pretend play is an important aspect for later development of abstract thought, communication skills, social understandings, as well as even linguistic competence in speech and reading. According to Vygotsky, play allows children to explore new skill levels and develop multiple perspectives (Vygotsky, 1967; Bordova and Leong, 2013; Slot et al., 2013). Dramatic pretend play allows children to think differently about the world and informs children of different social attributes that would be obtainable through the brick and mortar of pencil/paper studies (Bordova, 2008; Bordova et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1967).

Play plays a vital role in young children's developmental skills both academically and socially (Hoffmann & Russ, 2011; Gayler & Evans, 2006; Kroll, 2017). Understanding the benefits of play is what is becoming an issue within the early childhood community (ECE). How teachers can implement a play-based curriculum while also maintaining state standards for academics. How educators can learn and utilize social/emotional self-regulation skills while also teaching the students the needed requirements to move on to the next grade (Bordova et al., 2013; Lam & Wong, 2017).

### **Definition of Terms**

*Play* is known as work that is done by a child (NAEYC, 2015). When in play, a child takes control of the child's learning and children can learn the standards in a way that makes sense to children.

*Play-Based Learning* PBL involves teachers creating the classroom to be a child-led area where children can learn through play situations that include academics as well as social skills. Students

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

learn both academics, social/emotional skills, as well as cognitive skills needed for school and life success (Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

*Self-Regulation* involves the child being able to manage the emotions, monitor behavior, understand feelings of (empathy), and create an environment that allows for positive learning situations between students (Kroll, 2017; Savina, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

This paper synthesized and analyzed multiple published peer-reviewed research articles regarding play and self-regulation skills while also focusing on the following question, “How can a play-based curriculum foster the development of social and emotional self-regulation skills in early childhood classrooms?” The research included, studies conducted by Slot et al. (2013), Kroll (2017), Denham et al. (2012), and others throughout this paper, all support and identify the purpose of play-based curriculum and structured classrooms while also explaining how self-regulation is developed in early childhood students and how play supports the development of self-regulation skills in these students through play-based pedagogy and theories (Slot et al., 2013; Kroll, 2017; and Denham et al., 2012). Research also within these studies focuses on the domains of social, emotional, and cognitive development within ECE classrooms. To further address the question with proper solutions, the sections will be broken down to address key concepts while also including the study’s main points such as study participants, purpose, methods, findings, and limitations.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Research findings have shown that through play experiences children learn concepts that cannot be taught simply by sitting at a desk and or listening to a teacher lecture about math and reading. Through play, children learn a variety of skills such as but not limited to: communication, social, emotional, cognitive, reading/language, problem-solving, and real-life situations (Slot et al., 2017; Kroll, 2017; Gayler & Evans, 2001; Hoffmann & Russ, 2011). Though with current practices and adhering to state/national guidelines regarding academic standards, educators throughout the field of early childhood education have had to reduce the number of time children have to partake in pretend play which hinders not only the children but also the teacher's knowledge on the benefits of play (Broekhuizen et al., 2017; Lillard et al., 2012). Research findings in this study support the need for at least an hour of play a day to not only allow children to be children but to also engage in scenarios that teach children about self-regulation skills while also learning about academics (Broekhuizen et al., 2017; Lillard et al., 2012). Through this review, the benefits of play, the development of self-regulation in early childhood education (ECE) students, and how play-based curriculums allow for the development of self-regulation skills will be addressed. A mix of qualitative, quantitative, and mix-method case studies have been selected to help emphasize and back the question of how play-based curricula foster the development of self-regulation skills in ECE.

#### **Defining Play-Based Learning**

Although research is making mounds in the field of ECE with a focus on play, it has yet to fully be defined what it means to utilize play-based learning. Aras (2016) explains that play-based learning refers to different play activities that allow children the time and educational

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

opportunities to develop learning skills within both the academic realm and mental realm (social, emotional, and cognitive regulation).

Due to the rise of standards and expectations set forth by educators to ensure completion of kindergarten, teachers throughout the field are running into the hardship of being able to push for academics as well as allowing students to learn through play and put into practices that are developmentally appropriate for this age group, otherwise known as DAP (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). To meet this high order, there is now a push for teachers and educators to become familiar with strategies known as play-based learning (PBL). PBL is not a teacher ran classroom, it is a child-centered room with a focus on the child's understanding of academics, social/emotional regulation skills, problem-solving skills, and life skills. It allows children to engage through play-based centers to help children learn both academics and mental skills (Taylor & Boyer, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

A play-based curriculum is built and researched around the premise of child-led situations that encourages children to think outside of the normal routine to better understand and think about academics in a different light (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). A case study conducted by Pyle and Danniels (2017) involved 67 different kindergarten teachers and assessed play strategies through three different methods: electronic survey, in-depth interviews, and observations within the classroom. Pyle and Daniels's (2017) purpose of the study was to figure out how teachers can effectively balance child free-play while also having to use instructional methods for academic purposes within the classroom. With the research and evidence collected, it was noted and shown that PBL showcases a more effective approach and deeper learning experience/connections made for the students rather than just "free play" (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

In a different qualitative research study, Nolan and Paatsch (2017) set out to examine PBL that was instructed and used within kindergarten classrooms on the bases understanding of the sociocultural theoretical framework for play. The total number of kindergartens that were observed was 49 children between the ages of 5-6. The sociocultural theory stems from the early works of Vygotsky which suggested that students learning is heavily impacted by the culture in which children are currently living (Nolan & Paatsch, 2017). PBL in this instance was an even stronger force of play because PBL utilizes the child-directed mode of thinking while the sociocultural theory also addresses the child first and the teacher second. The findings of Nolan and Paatsch (2017) indicated the fact that a) teachers need more training in implementing play-based learning communities and b) PBL helped students achieve higher scores regarding reading/language arts and also a heightened awareness of social/emotional regulation skills.

PBL has taken a rise on the lasting effects of school and education within the field of ECE. Educators are beginning to see the benefits of play, how it develops self-regulation skills needed for later school and life success, while also noticing a difference it makes in the children when there is time planned out to engage in instructed play rather than just a free play situation that is undirected and unstructured (Taylor & Boyer, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Nolan & Paatsch, 2017; Kroll, 2016; Slot et al., 2017).

### **Benefits of Play**

Play allows children the time to develop self-regulatory skills in a safe place with friends and without the fear of judgment or embarrassment due to an adult being around (Kroll, 2017). Play throughout the years in the education world has been thought of as a waste of time for both educators and students. However, thanks to the research, play has been shown to help children enhance and develop self-regulation skills in addition to emotional/social skills for current and

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

later school/life success (Aras, 2016; Ashiabi, 2005; Kroll, 2017). Play is a time for students to engage with friends, learn through exploring, and practice self-regulation skills.

Research has shown that when teachers change the scene and create and utilize a play-based curriculum teachers are changing the way that students learn and retain information (Bordova, 2008; Lifter et al., 2011; Savina, 2014). Students are then able to “escape” to a reality that is imagined and capable of setting forth the rules from society in this play situation. Students then put to work the emotions that have been practiced/understood, social roles, and norms that are present in the real world and play in these “real life” situations. This type of play is noted as socio-dramatic pretend play (Kroll, 2017; Bordova et al., 2013; Slot et al., 2017; Bordova, 2008). Socio-dramatic play is the most widely used type of play because it allows students to reenact situations that are common to the child. Socio-dramatic play then allows children to feel even more comfortable using the different emotions and social cues that have been learned (Stanton-Chapman, 2014).

The frustration with today’s academic push of standards and grades within early childhood is that it is taking away time from play and children being able to practice self-regulation skills. Hoffmann and Russ (2011), expressed through the research the benefits that play has on allowing children to develop these self-regulation skills. The research conducted by Hoffmann and Russ (2011) maintains the fact that when children have this “safe” place children are more comfortable practicing these skills and motivated to learn self-regulation skills as well as academic standards.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the major preschool accrediting body in the United States is noted in research conducted by Lillard et al. (2012) that reinforces the statement of play developing self-regulation skills with a positive

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

relation to academics and later life success. Play is a significant contributor to such skills, which is why the curriculum should be centered around play and allow children to engage in self-initiated play with peers (Lillard et al., 2012; Aras, 2015). Two leading psychologists in the field of early childhood, Vygotsky and Piaget, have both provided research that explains play is an important aspect of early childhood education and the development of cognitive/developmental skills (Aras, 2015).

### *Natural Occurrence of Play*

When play happens, children can play and interact with children of the same age. Children can escape to a reality that is a child created and can utilize the rules of real society and play pretend roles with real roles (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). This type of play is noted as socio-dramatic pretend play. This play is the most common amongst preschool children. Socio-dramatic play is when children take on roles of other known adults in life and use the same actions, emotions, and syntax to replicate during play (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). Socio-dramatic play is a great way for children to practice self-regulation and understand the real use of emotion and social skills (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). Tina L. Stanton-Chapman (2014) wrote a qualitative research article about promoting positive peer interactions and how teachers can help develop these skills in sociodramatic play.

The motivation for play comes from within the child and not from external forces which makes play the greater successor for children in learning and acquiring new goals (Slot et al., 2017; Vygotsky, 1967; Bordova et al., 2013). Play is a place that allows children to connect academic standards with real-life situations while also developing self-regulation skills that will then benefit the children for later academic success (Aras, 2015). Play is an important aspect because children learn vital skills while engaging in dramatic play that the child would not be

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

able to learn by just sitting and doing worksheets and or listening to a lesson all day from the teacher (Bordova and Leong, 2019). Play promotes the development of independence and self-worth by being able to scaffold learning concepts and acquire new knowledge in fun ways.

Selda Aras (2015), comments that play is an inward motivator, there is no external motivation which is noted also by Vygotsky in the sense that play promotes positive reinforcement of learning and highlights the personal gain of knowledge (Bordova, 2008; Bordova and Leong, 2019). Play is for the child, not the teacher. It increases the self-awareness and self-worth of a child to reinforce learning new skills. Reinga M. Milteer et al., (2012), concluded that play is essential to the child's emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development, especially in the early childhood years. It reinforces the skills children have learned to tie together all of the self-regulation and academic information that has been learned (Miltier et al., 2012).

### ***Teacher's Role in Supporting Play Development***

Teachers have a great opportunity to help children learn about social skills and positive interactions between friends. Allowing time for these authentic peer interactions creates a positive dynamic within the classroom so that the children feel safe and secure and can practice these self-regulation skills without judgment (Pyle et al., 2018). The reason to promote peer interactions is so that children have a "mirror" to practice the emotions on. If two children are engaging in socio-dramatic play then the children can use each other to mimic and or play off of the emotions that the other person is displaying (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). Socio-dramatic play allows children to see how different emotions are used and then how to display and use that emotion. Research findings in this paper conclude that play is a positive way to enforce socio-dramatic play because children are creating a scene where the children are controlling the rules



## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

and setting (Savina, 2014; Bordova and Leong, 2019; Milteer et al., 2012; Stanton-Chapman, 2014). Socio-dramatic play allows children to take control of the environment allowing children to take control of others' emotions through play (Stanton-Chapman, 2014).

Even though peer relationships can happen naturally, it is also up to the teacher to make sure that the climate and environment of the classroom is a warm and inviting space for the students. Teachers must also meet the need for security/safety so that children can engage in socio-dramatic play at a high intensity to increase the ability to develop self-regulation skills (Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Bordova et al., 2013). Play is a significant contributor to self-regulation skills, and why curriculum should be centered around play, allowing children to engage in self-initiated play with peers. Vygotsky and Piaget, both concluded that play was an important aspect of early childhood education and the development of cognitive/developmental skills (Aras, 2015).

Research findings indicate that teachers can implement play in different ways. It can be from outside objects to new props, toys, and even interesting academic bulletin boards, however, maybe, teachers can use play to help broaden the opportunities for the children to learn academic and social self-regulatory skills (Kroll, 2017). Teachers and parents alike have the opportunities to help teach children through play. "When we watch children in pretend play, it seems to us like a very important activity" (as cited in Lillard et al., 2012). Teachers are the main influencer of how well play is going to be perceived and made known throughout the classroom. Kangas et al., (2015) explain that children who feel welcomed and who have a teacher that is willing to let the child enjoy play are more excited to learn and be engaged with the academics of the school. Teachers are not only responsible for teaching academics but also are responsible for creating a safe environment for students.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### **Developmental Theorist on Play-Based Learning**

Play is an opportunity for preschool children to watch and practice different emotions while in a safe and fun environment surrounded by friends. From the research, it is noted that play promotes an environment where with the guided instruction (scaffolding) of a teacher, the child can start to develop these self-regulation skills and understand the emotions that are being felt (Bordova et al., 2013). Vygotsky coined the statement “internal voice” and that is when children have the little voice that helps children navigate feelings, monitor actions, and adapt to any environmental changes that are going on throughout the classroom or situation (Savina, 2014).

With the many different theorists within the field of early childhood education (ECE) come several different viewpoints regarding play and how it interfolds with academics and regulation skills. Froebel, another educational theorist regarding play and self-regulation, and Vygotsky would both agree that play is the most important aspect of a young child’s academic day due to how children learn more than just academics through play, and within this concept, children can speculate, think ahead of the proposed zone of proximal development, and be surrounded by like-minded individuals (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Lowenfeld, 1991; Manning, 2005). According to Froebel’s theory of early childhood education, Froebel emphasized the importance of the teachers’ use of a play-based curriculum and how when set up correctly the materials that are available for the children aid in the discovery and learning of other subjects and skills (Manning, 2005).

Within the eight different stages of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, Erikson’s third stage of his theory focuses primarily on children between the ages of 3-6. As noted by Erikson (1959) his third is imitative versus guilt stage which within this stage children

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

can now carry out different forms of plans through play and other social means such as communication and games. Erikson viewed play as an essential aspect of children being able to develop key social cues while also learning about emotions and personality styles through the three different stages: the autocosmic, microsphere, and microsphere (Erikson, 1959; Powell, 2010). In addition to Erikson and Froebel, Freud brings into the picture of play by perceiving play as a form of desire fulfillment that allows children to overcome any fears and social anxieties children may have within the scope of education and life (Freud, 1959). In alignment with the other theorist who believes that play is essential for learning, Freud adds to this theory of play by viewing play as a way for children to practice and solidify symbolic schemes throughout life (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006) However, the main focus within the field of sociodramatic play and play as a whole, Vygotsky coins the field in this area. Vygotsky is known for the theory of sociodramatic play while also investigating how play allows children to develop self-regulation skills.

### **Vygotskian Perspective**

Why then should educators promote play and how does play allow children to develop these self-regulation skills? Vygotsky, who was the leading influencer of self-regulation within early childhood believed that children's greatest self-control and self-regulation happens in play (Slot et al., 2017; Baron et al., 2019). Self-regulation as explained by Vygotsky, "is a process that subsumes the internalization of social norms and the development of skills to conform to standards" (as cited in Elias & Berk 2001, p. 216). Vygotsky studied the impacts of dramatic and structured play themes within the preschool classroom. He determined that when children are truly playing, children are engaging already in self-regulated behaviors due to the nature of the

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

relationship between the roles children play and the rules attached to these roles (Bodrova et al., 2013).

Vygotsky created guidelines for what is now called the “Tools of the Mind” curriculum. This curriculum emphasizes a play-driven theme classroom that allows children time and practice within mature structured play and opportunities to then develop self-regulation skills through this mature play (Baron et al., 2019). Baron et al., (2019) and Montroy et al., (2016) both explain that when children have time to practice, understand, and develop self-regulation skills within the preschool years, children are then being set up for greater academic success in the future. Research findings have indicated that play enhances self-regulation growth and forces children to practice roles and different scenarios while engaging with friends (Bordova et al., 2013; Baron et al., 2019; Kroll, 2017)

Vygotsky’s most well-known quote regarding self-regulation and play states “in play he, as it were, a head taller than himself” (as cited in Baron et al., 2019; Bodrova et al., 2013). What is meant by that is that children, when children are engaging in play, act older and wiser than the child may seem. Children have no limits when it comes to playing. Children go about playing in such a way that imagination flows and voices have no limits. Play allows children to adapt to new themes and emotions and allows children to practice over and over again how to act in public. From the research, it is noted by Vygotsky that structured mature play is a form of play that pushes children to act out within children’s own self-regulation needs. Children need the high structured play to allow for scenarios to arise between other children when acting out different characters to practice and understand emotions depicted by play situations and peers.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### **Social/Emotional Development in Early Childhood Education**

Although academics are a leading factor in today's society when dealing with school readiness, social and emotional development have become to take a stand in being just as important as academics, especially within early childhood education (Kaufman et al., 2009; Coelho et al., 2019). With this in mind, Montroy et al. (2016) also state that the development of self-regulation is identified as a fundamental skill to life functioning skills and an early maker for later school life. According to different cognitive studies within the field of self-regulation in ECE, it is noted that the key skills that are developed regarding self-regulation include: taking turns in conversation and play, persisting in play activities, and recalling simple instructions from peers and teachers (Coelho et al., 2019).

A study conducted by Coelho et al. (2019) took three groups of children within kindergarten years and divided the children according to the mental state: having a disability, at risk, and developing normally, and assessed self-regulation skills through observations, games, and play engagement. Coelho et al. (2019) study indicated that students who engaged through the play activities developed higher levels of self-regulation skills which aid in the development of current and later school/life success. The research conducted by Coelho et al. (2019) provided input and highlights the relevance of promoting the development of self-regulation through early childhood education classrooms. Likewise, another study conducted by Viega et al. (2017) took 44 male and 29 female participants from preschool classrooms all between the ages of four-to-six years old to observe the different play situations. For this research, Viega et al. (2019) took the children who were assessed at recess to identify the different types of play that the children would involve the children in to see how it helped developed social and emotional skills.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

After five weeks of observation and video assessment of these children and teachers, results indicated that preschool-aged children would play more so within the rough and tumble form of play (Viega et al., 2017). The findings indicated that these students who engaged with smaller groups of peers should have longer social interactions with both peers and teachers and showed a heightened awareness of others' emotions (Viega et al., 2017). The students in the study conducted by Viega et al. (2017), were in turn more socially competent due to the nature of the play and how play helped developed social/emotional self-regulation skills. Therefore, it indicates that preschool students when allowed adequate time to play is an important growth indicator of both social regulation and emotional regulation skills (Viega et al., 2017).

### **Development of Emotional Regulation in Play**

Emotional regulation as it compares to self-regulation focuses on the child being able to manage and understand only emotions during social interactions. Unlike self-regulation, which encompasses the entire person's internal dialogue, emotional regulation is what a child needs to help control emotions throughout daily experiences and later in larger complex social interactions (Kwon & Yawkey, 2000; Goldstein & Lerner, 2017). Allowing children to practice controlling emotions in pretend play situations helps children learn how to then control emotions in real-life settings (Bordova & Leong, 2019).

In a research study conducted by Goldstein and Lerner (2017) it was noted that when children are allowed to engage in these high dramatic play situations, the children have greater retention of how emotions work and know how to use emotions in different settings. Children feel safe and confident during play as it is a time for children to be with friends and practice new things without fear of adults' judgment which is why a play-based curriculum is vital for the development of self-regulation skills (Goldstein & Lerner, 2017; Bordova & Leong, 2019).

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

The study conducted by Goldstein and Lerner (2017), took 97 low-SES preschool-aged students all within the same age group of four years old to determine how dramatic pretend play games help develop emotional self-regulation skills. Goldstein and Lerner (2017), took groups of the children and divided the children into different dramatic play games to observe/assess the levels of emotional regulation during the play activities. Through this research, the evidence showed that dramatic pretend play games involving different physical and emotional states allowed children to learn and connect on different levels with the many emotions of the young child (Goldstein and Lerner, 2017). The findings helped understand the importance of pretend play and set forth for future studies on how the function of pretense and play aid in the development of self-regulation skills, especially for children who are from a low economic background such as these students from the study (Goldstein and Lerner, 2017).

Although social and emotional regulation skills are tied together when discussed on a developmental level, emotional and social regulation are two different components that have the same ending goal. Emotional regulation focuses on the child being able to manage and process emotions while partaking in play with peers (Bordova & Leong, 2019; Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). The ability to process and handle emotions is what children need to be working on in early childhood school settings, children need to learn about emotions and why/how emotions are used (Kwon & Yawkey, 2000). When teachers explain the correct way to handle and use emotions, teachers are essentially setting the students up to succeed in later life. When children see the use of emotions by a teacher and have the time to experience and practice while in a safe place, the children are more apt to control and manage the different emotions due to knowing how emotions work (Goldstein & Lerner, 2017).

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

When developing emotional regulation skills, Galyer and Evans (2001) explain that when teachers utilize positive reinforcements in dealing with behavior, children are learning the effects of positive over negative behavior actions in response to emotions. In response to this conclusion, The C. Ind. Le Project, explained by Whitebread et al., (2009), showed that out of the 582 events that were recorded to monitor self-regulation skills, 376 of the events were child-initiated events, while the rest were initiated due to parent/teacher involvement. This project was conducted to measure the amount of self-regulation (metacognitive and emotional) skills children had or were able to develop through pretend play. The study goes on to explain that yes children learn from teachers and parents, however when students are involved in play that is child lead/centered the grasp of emotional regulation is higher due to the positive reinforcement that is seen from peers (Whitebread et al., 2009).

Another research study conducted by Kwon and Yawkey (2000), concludes that children, when engaged in self-initiated play with other children have higher levels of recognition of emotions and can then express in the play situations with different emotions lead by other children. Play allows children to initiate different social scenes that involve many different emotions brought about by the students. Children can mirror each other, ask questions, watch and observe how others act, and learn through play the emotions that come with life and society (Kwon & Yawky, 2000; Whitebread et al., 2009; Goldstein & Lerner, 2017).

Another study conducted by Denham et al. (2012) took 322 preschool-aged students and 100 kindergarten-aged students to examine and observe the self-regulatory roots of emotional knowledge and how it develops in the early years of children. Denham et al. (2012) research included the emotional knowledge of school adjustments such as new grades and teachers, while also including the age, gender, and risk for disability for differences in how emotional



## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

competence is developed (Denham et al., 2012). To assess the children, Denham et al. (2012) utilized the Preschool Self-regulation Assessment (PSRA), School adjustment: Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation, Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment, and the ECLA-K Academic Rating Scale to all assess the children's emotional competence with each different group of indicators.

The results of this study indicated that students who were at risk and came from homes that were considered low-SES showed lower levels of emotional regulation rather than students who came from middle-class home structures and who were developing normally (Denham et al., 2012). However, the results from the assessments showed that students who come from low-SES need more insight on how to handle emotional situations and knowledge regarding emotional maturity through help from the teachers and the schools' children attend (Denham et al., 2012). Students need the ability to learn about the different emotions that are used in daily life. This is showcased through both at-risk students and developing normal students, as well as students from both sides of the economic discussion, emotional knowledge and self-regulation are important indicators for later school and life success (Denham et al., 2012; Coelho et al., 2019; Goldstein and Lerner, 2017; Viegas et al., 2017).

In summary, the literature emphasizes that play is a strong indicator for helping the development of emotional regulation in early childhood children (Denham et al., 2012; Coelho et al., 2019; Goldstein and Lerner, 2017; Viegas et al., 2017). The connection between play at different ranges and the development of emotional regulation suggests that students who engaged in these activities are proven to have great success in school thereafter completing the preschool and kindergarten grade levels. The following section showcases the importance and development

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

of self-regulation as a whole and how this is different from the emotional side of self-regulation skills.

### **Development of Self-Regulation in Play**

Self-regulation is a process that is coined for the understanding and processing of one's own emotions and being able to use correct emotions/behaviors within the given situations (Slot et al., 2017, Kroll, 2017). The push for self-regulation in preschool is important because when children can practice and learn about emotions at a younger age, research has shown that children will be able to have a higher retention rate in later school and life success (Montroy et al., 2016). Children though need a safe place where the child can learn these social/emotional milestones in the developmental years of ECE. Play has been a prime research topic and indicator of children being able to process and develop self-regulation skills. Play has many benefits other than allowing children time to spend with peers. Play has the ability to enhance problem-solving skills, emotion regulation, metacognition, and academic success such as literacy and math (Savina, 2014).

Children cannot simply learn the traits of self-regulation through straight academics. Play is an opportunity for preschool children to watch and practice different emotions while in a safe and fun environment surrounded by friends. Research suggests that play is an area that promotes an environment filled with numerous resources that with the guided instruction (scaffolding) of a teacher, the child can start to develop self-regulation skills and understand the different emotions that are felt during the day (Bordova et al., 2013). Vygotsky made the statement "internal voice" and that is when children have the little voice in the child's head that helps navigate the feelings, monitor actions, and adapt to any environmental changes that are going on throughout the classroom or situation (Savina, 2014).

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

The teaching and understanding of self-regulation have been brought to the surface of education and are becoming a highlighted topic throughout the curriculum. It has been researched since Vygotsky himself, that when children have self-regulation skills the children are being set up for later academic success as well as life success (Bordova et al., 2013; Slot et al., 2017). Self-regulation is an aspect of early childhood education that is a major learning and teaching aspect of childhood development, academic achievement, social competence, and positive behavior in and out of the classroom and throughout the years (Slot et al., 2017). Self-regulation involves the child being able to manage emotions, monitor behavior, understand feelings as well as friends (empathy), and create an environment that allows for positive learning situations between students (Kroll, 2017; Savina, 2014).

In a study conducted by Hoffman and Russ (2012), it was observed and studied how pretend play impacted the creativity aspect of young children, as well as self-regulation skills when participating with other children in pretend/fantasy play. Being a quantitative study, it utilized different scoring and assessing techniques to help dig deeper into any associations pretend play may have with those two aspects of childhood development (Hoffman & Russ, 2012). For this study, Hoffman and Russ (2012) used 61 kindergartens and had the parents sign consent forms allowing the children to partake in the study. The research conducted allowed Hoffmann and Russ (2012) to understand how pretend play impacts self-regulation skills. Hoffman and Russ (2012) analysis of the methods and research showed that when children engaged in pretend play, the ability to self-regulate emotions was a positive correlation. This source also dives into the correlation of divergent thinking (a subsequent of emotional/self-regulation), showing a positive relationship between children having higher divergent thinking skills, when partaking in pretend play with peers or caregivers. The research conducted by

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

Hoffmann and Russ (2012), showed how pretend play when used correctly and to a high degree can help develop and nurture the child's understanding of self-regulation skills.

Morrison (2015) and Kroll (2017) both have similar research explaining that when students are surrounded by a curriculum and setting that enforces high dramatic play and play-based learning, these students have shown increased self-regulation skills in later school experience and higher academic achievement. Play is not just a concept that children do because it is fun and seems silly; it allows for children to be in a place that encompasses learning and knowledge within a setting that is child-centered which is the focus of a play-based curriculum (Morrison, 2015; Kroll 2017). When directed in sociodramatic play, children are able to put together the concepts that have been taught at a level which is understood by the child. Self-regulation, as explained by Vygotsky, "is a process that subsumes the internalization of social norms and the development of skills to conform to standards" (as cited in Elias & Berk, 2001, p. 216).

In the early years of school, the brains of these preschoolers and kindergarteners are rapidly growing and able to practice and utilize the development of self-regulation skills which entail: controlling emotions, monitoring behaviors, having empathy towards others, and learning how life works (Slot et al., 2017; Bordova et al., 2013). On similar terms and research, Hoffman and Russ (2011), agreed that to be successful in today's society children need the ability to pretend play with peers. When engaged in pretend play children have the ability to practice social norms, emotions, and life skills that are prudent to later success in school and life (Hoffman & Russ, 2011; Slot et al., 2017; Bordova et al., 2013).

Lev Vygotsky, the leading influencer of play-based curriculum and the development of social/emotional regulation skills, explained that when children are engaged in play, the greatest

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

development of self-control/regulation is happening during these play interactions (Slot et. al, 2017). By focusing on a play-based curriculum, teachers are redirecting the focus to the students being the leaders and directors of the learning (Bordova et al., 2013). Research has concluded that children should have this playtime to allow for situations in which children can practice and learn how emotions work in a safe environment directed by kids (Elias & Berk, 2001; Bordova, 2008; Kroll, 2017). Play as a whole is a concept that is underestimated and passed over due to the lack of knowledge by educators and practitioners within the field of education. This is why new research needs to be brought to light on the importance of play and the development of social/emotional self-regulation skills.

### **Self-regulation and Play-Based Curriculums**

Research has shown prominent connections between the development of self-regulation skills and the use of a play-based classroom. To further understand this theory, Sezgin and Demiriz (2019) conducted a study to understand how play fosters the development of self-regulation in early childhood students. Sezgin and Demiriz (2019) set out to include a random sample of 54 preschool students whose ages ranged between three and a half to five and a half-year-olds. For the assessment, Sezgin and Demiriz (2019) allowed the children to partake in a performance-based assessment test, called Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders (HTKS). HTKS was filled with multiple performance-based games that were then used to assess the levels of self-regulation skills that were depicted in the children during participation in the games (Sezgin & Demiriz, 2019). Sezgin and Demiriz's (2019) study lasted eight weeks, and was passed to the children three days a week, and included several different components such as: working independently and collaboratively, listening skills, waiting for turns, raising hands during the

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

discussion, decision-making, following directions, and playing within a play-based game (Sezgin & Demiriz, 2019).

The results of this study showed that students before this curriculum showed little understanding and development of self-regulation while after the test, the children showed higher levels of self-regulation and understanding of how to manage emotions, wait turns, problem-solve, and help others in need (Sezgin & Demiriz, 2019). Although Sezgin and Demiriz (2019) study did prove an upward trend in play and self-regulation skills, the limitation of this study was due to the lack of other play activities observed. This study proved significant in the understanding of self-regulation skills and how play-based classrooms to aid in the development of these skills (Sezgin & Demiriz, 2019). Sezgin and Demiriz's (2019) study aligned with other current research studies such as those done by Lillard et al. (2013), Kroll (2017), Montroy et al. (2016), and others that have been or will be discussed throughout this paper.

In a different study conducted by Slot et al. (2017), the same age range of children was taken to identify how executive functions (hot or cold) were heightened during pretend play which aids in the development of self-regulation skills. The study was a quantitative study that selected children at random and was centralized to observations of naturalistic behaviors within a self-contained classroom (Slot et al., 2017). For this study, Slot et al. (2017) kept two major questions in mind when conducting the research, how can cognitive and emotional regulation be distinguished in children, and to what extent is the children's development of self-regulation skills dependent on play-based activities. To complete the sample, 87 different preschool centers were selected, which yielded 113 children with a median age of 37 months (Slot et al., 2017). The results of the study conducted by Slot et al. (2017) showcased those students who participated in a highly dramatic play scenario showed higher levels of executive functions skills

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

which proceeded to highlight the development of self-regulation in these children. The depth and intensity of pretend play greatly impacts how much self-regulation can be developed and how well students can fully use the skills that are being taught (Slot et al., 2017). Although these past two research studies have proven a positive correlation between self-regulation development and pretend play; a study conducted by Baron et al. (2019) indicated no radical change or improvement between self-regulation development and the use of the “Tools of the Mind” curriculum invented and founded by Lev Vygotsky.

Baron et al. (2019) were researching to identify the correlation between the use of the Tools of the Mind curriculum and how this particular curriculum benefited students’ ability to understand and grow knowledge of self-regulation skills. The study conducted by Baron et al. (2019), took data from 42 different classrooms ranging in grades from pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade and explicitly taught the Tools of the Mind curriculum over five years. With the use of different games, curriculum guides, observations, and assessments, it was noted after the five years that when used explicitly and frequently the Tools of the Mind curriculum predicted less self-regulation growth as the years went on (Baron et al., 2019). Although the curriculum is widely known and used throughout different preschools, this one research indicated that it can produce results that yield negative effects on the development of self-regulation and a more structured play-based environment (Baron et al., 2019).

Self-regulation as shown by research has indicated an improvement in preschool and kindergarten students through the process of a play-based classroom (Baron et al., 2019; Slot et al., 2017; Sezgin & Demiriz, 2019). With an emphasis on creating a play-based classroom, teachers have the opportunity to allow children time to understand and develop self-regulation skills that will be needed in later school and life success (Kroll, 2017; Slot et al., 2017).

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

Although this is the case, teachers along with early childhood practitioners are still lacking in the understanding of play and how the different types of play are beneficial within an early childhood classroom (Lillard et al., 2012).

### **Play in the Classroom**

Being able to properly produce correct emotions and knowing how to confidently use emotions when engaging in conversation with others is something that children need to understand how to do. Play allows children to do this because, in play, children can create whatever situations are wanted and practice the many different types of emotions while in a safe place (Savina, 2014). While academics are of course the main point of elementary school, children who are in the preschool setting and school years need the time to learn how to manage and control the emotions. By incorporating a play-themed curriculum, educators are setting children up to succeed in school and throughout the rest of the educational years, and children then get the many different opportunities through play to develop and manage the emotions that are expressed during the day (Whitebread et al., 2009; Savina, 2014).

### **Language Development**

Play is not just an integral part of the curriculum for the development of self-regulation skills, play is a vital aspect of the learning and development of language (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010, p. 11). When children are engaged in play with one another, play also the use of children to utilize a “shared language” to keep the play flowing and dialogue happening so play does not stop. Children learn new words from friends and develop an understanding of the English language amongst peers (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010, p. 11). With this, children are also utilizing language skills to develop rules, and expectations, and simply have conversations with fellow peers. Vygotsky researched and took note of how private speech helps children develop



## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

language skills and that it is most commonly found when children are engaged in play. Private speech as explained by Vygotsky is a time that the child can learn and practice speech, language, and reading within the child's guidance and with no judgment from others (Bodrova, 2008).

Vygotsky also explains that play impacts how children acquire early literacy due to how it affects oral language development, metalinguistic awareness, and the development of imagination (Bordova, 2008). Play also provides unique opportunities for young children to understand the authentic purpose of reading as well as writing in a setting that is fun, inviting, and child-focused (Bodrova, 2008). Learning literacy skills does not have to be a chore for students. Teachers can help create fluid literacy play centers that are filled with books and writing items that can help promote a literacy-filled area that students can incorporate into play which reinforces the literacy skills and helps children practice reading and writing skills.

### **Teachers' Role in Implementing Play**

To emphasize the importance of peer interactions and the development of self-regulation skills in play, Tina L. Stanton-Chapman (2014) wrote a qualitative research article about how teachers can help develop these skills and play a vital role in making situations that allow children time to engage in socio-dramatic play. Allowing time for authentic peer relationships puts the emphasis back on not only a child-centered curriculum but a room that is safe and encompasses the learning of everyone involved. The main reason to promote peer interactions is to allow children to have a "mirror" to practice the many different emotions. If two children are playing in a socio-dramatic play situation then the children can use each other to mimic and use the emotions that the other friend is displaying. The children can then learn which emotion to use and how to use it to keep the play going (Stanton-Chapman, 2014). This allows for children to

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

see how different emotions are used and then how to display and use that emotion in different situations.

Although educators want to make sure that students engage in the natural occurrence of friendships, teachers also need to be sure that there has been a room created that is safe, loving, nurturing, and inviting to all so that friendships can bloom naturally (Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Kroll et al., 2017). Teachers must also meet the need for security/safety so that children can engage in sociodramatic play at a high intensity to increase the ability to develop self-regulation skills (Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Bordova et al., 2013). Two leading psychologists, Vygotsky and Piaget, both concluded that play was an important aspect of early childhood education and the development of cognitive/developmental skills (Aras, 2015).

In a qualitative study conducted by Taylor and Boyer (2019), it was determined how the different levels of play, play-based learning, and teacher-led initiatives played a part in a child's learning and viewpoint on play-based learning. Taylor and Boyer (2019) researched how a play-based curriculum can be used in the different types of play such as child-directed versus teacher-directed play, the social benefits of play, how children can learn the academics through play, as well as the educator's role in promoting a high dramatic play-based center. The research noted that educators who put a strong emphasis on creating a play-based classroom allowed the students to feel more confident in the learning of the academic material (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). The research from Taylor and Boyer (2019) validates the importance of how an educator's role in a play-based curriculum allows for children to not only learn academics but also develop the self-regulation and social skills needed for later life and school success.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### **Tools of the Mind Curriculum**

A resource that has been used to study the effects of play and a way for teachers to implement play, has been noted as having great outcomes in explaining the benefits of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). This curriculum is called “Tools of the Mind” and it is based on the Vygotsky approach to play. Tools of the Mind is a curriculum built specifically for early childhood education that focuses on self-regulation and executive functions (emotional control) in young children, allowing for make-believe play and playful learning (Bodrova and Leong, 2019).

Bordova and Leong (2019) explained a study of the Tools of the Mind curriculum that is based on Vygotsky’s approach to play-based learning and how when used correctly students retained the information greater than students who are taught a typic standards-based approach. Tools of the Mind is a play-based curriculum that emphasizes socio-dramatic play situations that encompass the academics taught during the day (Bordova & Leong, 2019). Research shows that it is up to the teachers and administrators to research the curriculum is used and how to make use of the assessments/observations off how the students learn in regards to which curriculum: play-based or standards approach, is taken. The study conducted by Bordova and Leong (2019) indicated that students within the early years who received the Tools of the Mind curriculum showed higher levels of being able to self-regulate and understand the social and emotional traits of other friends and teachers. However, the limitation of the study conducted by Bordova and Leong (2019) was that it utilized a small subject pool to test the practices of the curriculum. The study also focused primarily on students who did receive the Tools of the Mind curriculum and not so much on students who did not receive this curriculum (Bordova & Leong, 2019).

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

As cited in Bodrova and Leong (2019), “Veteran teachers report that the lack of play opportunities in today’s kindergarten affects negatively children’s social skills and language development” (p. 40). Likewise, in Ashiabi (2005), some teachers have thought to believe that teacher involvement in play was actually interfering with or taking away from the children’s time. However, when teachers are involved, teachers are benefitting the children and help children learn and develop regulation skills while having fun as well with the children (Ashiabi, 2005). The Tools of the Mind curriculum allows for the involvement and interaction of the teacher. It helps the teacher interact with the children in a playful yet academic approach, allowing for the child to grow academically and socioemotionally (Bodrova and Leong, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Play is a vital resource for early childhood education. Although some educators seem to be pushing play aside, play is starting to make a comeback with the more research and studies that are being brought to light and shown to educators and admin who are slowly beginning to understand the true impact that play has on these children (Slot et al., 2017; Denham et al., 2012; Kroll, 2016). Although the research throughout the paper has highlighted the importance and answered some questions, there is still more research to be done and more writing to be done on the importance of play, how it develops social/emotional regulation, how to implement it, and creating a curriculum that emphasizes play and authentic assessment/observation.

What notes to be the same amongst the research conducted by Bodrova and Leong (2019), Kroll (2017), Lillard et al. (2012), and Kangas et al. (2015), play is an essential aspect for children to utilize when developing self-regulatory skills in early childhood. The lack of implementation resources and helpful advice from school officials makes this a hard topic for teachers and parents to fully get on board with. Despite the research that has been conducted

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

showing evidence of play improving children's self-regulatory and emotional regulatory skills, more research on how to address implementation and school involvement should be done. More research should also be done on the amount of play and explicitly the type of play that does affect the regulatory skills in children. The research shown has indicated that play if used appropriately, can benefit children in developing self-regulatory skills. Creating a curriculum that is play-based for the classroom would strengthen both children and educators.

Within the field of early childhood, more research is consistently growing to improve the well-being of both teachers and students. With the help of future studies that could be done and further explanation of the research, play can become a vital resource for ECE throughout the years. With this in mind, the next chapter is going to emphasize measures that could take action to help advocate and bring awareness to the importance that play brings to the classroom and children.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

### **Chapter Three: Discussions/Applications/Future Studies**

Research has shown that play when used properly can allow children to develop, understand, and use self-regulatory skills to understand emotions and social relationships (Coelho et al., 2018; Elias & Berk, 2002; Kroll, 2016). Research has shown that play allows children to perform at levels that are past the zone of proximal development achieving a status of “performing ahead of normal achievement” (Heidemann and Hewitt, 2010). The studies and findings of Lev Vygotsky support research in ways that allow children to develop play awareness as well as self-regulation skills learned through play-based curriculums (Bordova and Leong 2013, Vygotsky, 1967). Creating play-based classrooms and curriculums within the preschool and kindergarten years allows children to have time to develop self-regulation skills needed for later school and life success. Research on play and how it fosters the development of self-regulation skills has provided insight for current teachers within the field of early childhood education informing teachers of best practices and policies to teach and help children grow through educational play settings.

#### **Summary of Insights**

Research advocates have showcased the importance of creating play-based classrooms for the preschool and kindergarten years (Milteer et al., 2011; Pyle et al., 2018; Nolan & Paatsch, 2017). Through the use of a play-based curriculum, children have the ability to develop and understand self-regulation skills that are associated with current and later school/life success (Kroll, 2017; Slot et al., 2013; Bodrova et al., 2013). Play allows children to develop these self-regulation skills that are enhanced through an environment that play can supply. Since children learn by different means and have different zones of proximal development, play allows children to learn at a level that is appropriate to that child while also increasing the chance for learning

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

outside of that child's particular zone of proximal development. Play when used correctly, can not only enhance the classroom environment by bringing in child-focused themes, but play can also bring awareness to the teacher by showing what the child knows and what may need to be focused on more (Bordova and Leong, 2019; Aras, 2015; Broekhuizen et al., 2016). With these goals and learning targets in mind, play is shown as an instructional tool that is beneficial rather than a tool that is used to "kill time" as often seen through the eyes of some parents and teachers.

Through play, children have the ability to learn social, emotional, and even cognitive skills that are not easily taught through the brick and mortar of pen and paper and teacher-directed instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009). With self-regulatory skills, children learn through play and are able to build and maintain friendships, understand the different social cues, as well as identify and understand how emotions work for children and adults. From the research, play has also been shown to help reduce anxiety and stress that children may face while in a school setting. When children are less stressed as well as have anxiety reduced, with these calming moods and environment, the classroom is set up for a greater success of learning for both children and teacher. With this, learning can continue how it is supposed to with fewer interruptions and fewer outbursts from children that have a difficult time understanding how self-regulation works. Play environments inside the classroom allow time for children to develop these self-regulation skills which in turn produced the calm and inviting classroom that most educators would like to have.

### **Application of Research**

Through the research done by these studies, the purpose of creating a play-based curriculum and how to use it within the field of ECE will help teachers better understand why play is important and useful within the preschool and kindergarten years. By increasing the

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

amount of time play is used within these classrooms, teachers will have a greater understanding of how to use play to its full potential and the added benefits of developing self-regulatory skills. With this added time of play, the stigma behind play will eventually be reduced due to the increasing knowledge and awareness of how play-based classrooms are essential and beneficial in these early years. Spreading the awareness of play and the knowledge learned from the research will not only benefit the use of play in classrooms, but also educate teachers and workers in the field of ECE on the best practices to observe, assess, and teach children in the preschool and kindergarten years. With increased professional development and resources for educators, making play a right and increasing advocacy for play-based curriculums within the field of ECE will help children and teachers learn with the best practices intended for early childhood.

### ***Making Play First***

With the growing importance of play-based curriculums and allowing time for children to take part in play activities, educators need to be informed of making sure to make play the priority and allowing play to happen for a minimum of thirty minutes a day (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). From the research, play has been a validating factor in improving children's social/emotional self-regulation skills, while also improving the academic nature such as language development which encompasses reading and writing (Baron et al., 2019; Montroy et a., 2016; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Even though states and regulations mandate the importance of teaching a standard-based curriculum, play is an aspect that can be added into the curriculum to allow children different perspectives on learning. Play is a vital role in early childhood education and the pedagogy research indicates that students who receive play-based curriculums have shown an increase in social skills, regulation skills, learning abilities, and success in school



## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

(Denham et al., 2012; Pyle et al., 2018). By including a play-based curriculum, educators are feeding into the natural urge of students which is to play. Educators that allow for learning to take place while keeping the students in charge of learning by encompassing play areas that emphasize the standard being taught.

### *Advocating for Play*

From the research, play has been shown and explained to educators that play should become a priority in the early childhood years due to the implications it puts on children's social, emotional, and academic success in life (Miller & Almon, 2009; Bordova et al., 2013; Aras, 2015; Ashiabi, 2007). With this newfound research, there are now many more ways in which educators can make a stance in advocating for play. With professional development, keeping up with the research, and applying developmentally appropriate practices, educators can decide to incorporate play while also advocating school board members on the importance of play. Teachers however should also dedicate time to learning about the benefits a play-based curriculum has on the development of social/emotional regulation skills. If educators take the time to build a foundation on the importance of play, educators would feel more confident in being able to advocate for high dramatic play time within the classroom. Through all of this, educators can start to advocate for play while also learning how to incorporate it within the classroom.

Ashiabi (2007) explained the importance of the teacher's role within play through a qualitative study. Within this study, Ashiabi (2007) noted that when teachers understand the significance play had on the development of self-regulation skills, there was more of an effort and increased awareness of growth for the development of play-based curriculums. Advocating is the first step that teachers can make to ensure play-based curriculums are at least heard and

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

made aware of within the field of early childhood education. From the research, educators will be given a foundation of knowledge that can be used to help advocate for play and explain not only the importance of play-based curriculums for preschool and kindergarten students but also the benefits of self-regulation growth/development through play.

### **Future Studies**

Findings from the literature indicate a gap between educators' awareness of the play-based curriculum and how to implement and utilize a play-based curriculum within the classrooms of preschoolers and kindergarteners. Research is out there for educators to read and study to understand the benefits of implementing a play-based curriculum, however, the push for academics over play is a battle that early childhood educators will, unfortunately, have to face while advocating for play. With more understanding and knowledge being built upon, more research can find ways to validate play-based classrooms in achieving the same learning targets as a regular teacher-directed classroom. More research on how to create a play-based curriculum that incorporates state standards would be a study that would allow educators and administrators to see the benefits of a play-based classroom.

Self-regulation is a concept that students and teachers both need help with understanding and even developing skills. Through play, research has shown that a play-based classroom allows children to learn even these types of skills that are needed in life. Studies from this literature review highlighted the fact that play does increase self-regulation skills and allows children to develop these skills over time. The limitations of these studies were that these studies solely focused on preschool-aged children. Kindergarten research on self-regulation and play should be an area that researchers dig more into and develop a sounder field of understanding for educators and administrators in the field of early childhood. This is the year that students are

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

learning and growing the most. Children need the time to play and studies need to emphasize the growth of self-regulation through play for these students. Some of the limitations regarding the research on self-regulation development include the demographics of the population for the studies and the depth/scope of self-regulation in regards to social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development through play. The research included in some of the studies such as those conducted by Slot et al. (2013), Montroy et al. (2016), and Broekhuizen et al. (2016) focused on the development of social and emotional development yet also noted the limitations of the impact for both cognitive and physical development through play.

From the studies throughout the literature review, another gap that would benefit future studies would be to expand the discussion on how play affects the later years of early childhood students. Studies in this paper focused on the years at hand which were preschool and kindergarten. Even though those were the planned grades needed from the research, there is a gap between how play extends over time and how play from the earlier years translates into later school and life success. It was noted from all the studies that play does improve the development of self-regulation in early childhood students and this has translated in some studies, however, for most of the studies, the researchers would note that future studies would need to be conducted to help bridge the gap between early school years and later school years (Lillard et al., 2013; Whitebread et al., 2009; Coelho et al., 2018).

A final future study that is consistent with the findings of this literature review would be to research how the different types of play affect the development of self-regulation independently. The studies of this literature review focused on play as a whole without dividing the research into the types and formats of play. This research study could show further indication of how in-depth play affects the development of self-regulation and which type of play enforces

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

the development at a deeper level. The benefit of this study would allow educators to build and focus curriculum around certain types of play while also including the academic standards that are required by state and federal laws.

### **Conclusion**

Research has validated and explained how when used correctly, play will foster the development of self-regulation skills amongst students in the preschool and kindergarten years. Instead of constantly being torn between pushing for academics or pushing for a more play-based approach to learning, educators should take a stand in advocating for a play-based curriculum that allows for the learning of academics while also fostering the development of self-regulation skills (Broekhuizen et al., 2016; Nilsson et al., 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Through the research and professional development courses, teachers and administrators in the field of early childhood education can bridge the gap between academics and high dramatic play. Self-regulation skills are essential for all children to have and if able to start understanding how these skills work early on in life, studies have yielded results for higher academic learning skills and improvement in everyday social activities (Slot et al., 2013; Bodrova & Leong, 2013; Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

Through the development of play-based classrooms, children will have the ability to enhance social and emotional skills in activities that are safe and inviting for children in the early years. Play has been proven by the research in this review to increase such regulation skills in children of all demographics and allowed for these children to have greater success in academics in school. For the reasons and the research noted throughout this paper, play should return to being the emphasis in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, and with these teachers should become educated on the benefits of play and how to effectively run a classroom that utilizes a

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

play-based curriculum to help foster the development of self-regulation skills in preschool and kindergarten students.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

**References**

- Aras, S. (2015). Free play in early childhood education: a phenomenological study. *Early Child Development and Care*, 186(7), 1173–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1083558>
- Ashiabi, G. S. (2007). Play in the preschool classroom: Its socioemotional significance and the teacher's role in play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(2), 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-007-0165-8>
- Baron, A., Malmberg, L.-E., Evangelou, M., Nesbitt, K., & Farran, D. (2019). The play's the Thing: Associations BETWEEN Make-believe play and self-regulation in the tools of the Mind early CHILDHOOD Curriculum. *Early Education and Development*, 31(1), 66–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2019.1613327>
- Berk, L. E., Mann, T.D., & Ogan, A.T. (2006). Make-Believe Play: Wellspring for development of self-regulation. In D.G. Singer, R. M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsh-Pasek (Eds.), *Play=Learning: How play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional learning* (pp. 74-99). New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.
- Bodrova, E. (2008). Make-believe play versus academic skills: A Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16:3, 357-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930802291777>
- Bodrova, E., Germeroth, C., & Leong, D.J. (2013). Play and self-regulation: Lessons from Vygotsky. *American Journal of Play*, 6(1), 111-123. <https://ezproxy.csp.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.csp.edu/docview/1547264211?accountid=26720>

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2019). Making play smarter, stronger, and kinder: lessons from Tools of the Mind. *American Journal of Play*, 12(1), 37-53.

<https://ezproxy.csp.edu/login?url=https://>

[www-proquest-com.ezproxy.csp.edu/docview/2335166318?accountid=26720](http://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.csp.edu/docview/2335166318?accountid=26720)

Broekhuizen, M. L., Slot, P. L., van Aken, M. A., & Dubas, J. S. (2016). Teachers' Emotional and Behavioral Support and Preschoolers' Self-Regulation: Relations With Social and Emotional Skills During Play. *Early Education and Development*, 28(2), 135–153.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1206458>

Coelho, V., Cadima, J., Pinto, A. I., & Guimarães, C. (2018). Self-regulation, engagement, and developmental functioning in preschool-aged children. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 41(2), 105–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815118810238>

Denham, S. A., Bassett, H. H., Way, E., Mincic, M., Zinsser, K., & Graling, K. (2012).

Preschoolers' emotion knowledge: Self-regulatory foundations, and predictions of early school success. *Cognition & Emotion*, 26(4), 667–679.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.602049>

Elias, C. L., & Berk, L. E. (2002). Self-regulation in young children: Is there a role for sociodramatic play? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(2), 216-238.

[http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.csp.edu/10.1016/S0885-2006\(02\)00146-1](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.csp.edu/10.1016/S0885-2006(02)00146-1)

Erikson, E. H. (1959). Psychological issues: Identity and the life cycle. Selected papers.

Psychological Issues, 1, 1-171. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1960-02756-001>

Freud, S. (1959). Two principles of mental functioning. In *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

- Galyer, K. T., & Evans, I. M. (2001). Pretend play and the development of emotion regulation in preschool children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 166(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443011660108>
- Goldstein, T. R., & Lerner, M. D. (2017). Dramatic pretend play games uniquely improve emotional control in young children. *Developmental Science*, 21(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12603>
- Hoffmann, J., & Russ, S. (2012). Pretend play, creativity, and emotion regulation in children. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 6(2), 175–184. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026299>
- Kangas, J., Ojala, M., & Venninen, T. (2015). Children's self-regulation in the context of participatory pedagogy in early childhood education. *Early Education and Development*, 26(5-6), 847–870. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2015.1039434>
- Kroll, L. R. (2016). Early childhood curriculum development: The role of play in building self-regulatory capacity in young children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(5-6), 854–868. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1223063>
- Kwon, J. Y., & Yawkey, T. D. (2000). Principles of emotional development and children pretend play. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 32(1), 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03169017>
- Lillard, A. S., Lerner, M. D., Hopkins, E. J., Dore, R. A., Smith, E. D., & Palmquist, C. M. (2013). The impact of pretend play on children's development: A review of the evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029321>
- Lowenfeld, M. (1991). *Play in Childhood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press



## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

- Manning, J. P. (2005). Rediscover Froebel: A call to re-examine his life & gifts. *Early childhood Education Journal*, 32(6), 371-376
- Milteer, R. M., Ginsburg, K. R., & Mulligan, D. A. (2011). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: Focus on children in poverty. *Pediatrics*, 129(1). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2953>
- Montroy, J. J., Bowles, R. P., Skibbe, L. E., McClelland, M. M., & Morrison, F. J. (2016). The development of self-regulation across early childhood. *Developmental Psychology*, 52(11), 1744–1762. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000159>
- Nilsson, M., Ferholt, B., & Lecusay, R. (2018). ‘The playing-exploring child’: Reconceptualizing the relationship between play and learning in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 19(3), 231–245.
- Nolan, A., & Paatsch, L. (2017). (Re)affirming identities: Implementing a play-based approach to learning in the early years of schooling. *International Journal of Early Years Educations*, 26(1), 42-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1369397>
- Powell, J. (2010). Preschool Parents’ and Teachers’ Perspective of Learning Through Play. Retrieved from <https://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu%3A168582>
- Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2016). A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play. *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), 274–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>
- Pyle, A., & DeLuca, C. (2017). Assessment in play-based kindergarten classrooms: An empirical study of teacher perspectives and practices. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 110(5), 457-466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2015.1118005>

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

- Pyle, A., Prioletta, J., & Poliszczuk, D. (2018). The play-literacy interface in full-day kindergarten classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *46*(1), 117-127.  
<http://doi.org.10.1007/s10643-017-0852z>
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Curby, T. W., Grimm, K. J., Nathanson, L., & Brock, L. L. (2009). The contribution of children's self-regulation and classroom quality to children's adaptive behaviors in the kindergarten classroom. *Developmental Psychology*, *45*(4), 958–972.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015861>
- Saracho, O. N., & Spodek, B. (1995). Children's play and early childhood education: Insights from history and theory. *Journal of Education*, *177*(3), 129-148. Retrieved from  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42742374>
- Savina, E. (2014). Does play promote self-regulation in children? *Early Child Development and Care*, *184*(11), 1692–1705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.875541>
- Sezgin, E., & Demiriz, D. (2019). Effect of play-based educational programme on behavioral self-regulation skills of 48–60-month-old children. *Early Child Development & Care*, *189*(7), 1100-1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1369972>
- Slot, P. L., Mulder, H., Verhagen, J., & Leseman, P. P. (2017). Preschoolers' cognitive and emotional self-regulation in pretend play: Relations with executive functions and quality of play. *Infant and Child Development*, *26*(6). <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.2038>
- Stanton-Chapman, T. L. (2014). Promoting Positive Peer Interactions in the Preschool Classroom: The Role and the Responsibility of the Teacher in Supporting Children's Sociodramatic Play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *43*(2), 99–107.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0635-8>

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM

- Taylor, M. E., & Boyer, W. (2019). Play-Based Learning: Evidence-based research to improve children's learning experiences in the kindergarten classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48(2), 127-133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00989-7>
- Veiga, G., de Leng, W., Cachucho, R., Ketelarr, L., Kok, J. N., Knobbe, A., Neto, C., & Rieffe, C. (2017). Social Competence at the playground: Preschoolers during recess. *Infant and Child Development*, 26(1).
- Whitebread, D., Coltman, P., Jameson, H., & Lander, R. (2009). Play, cognition and self-regulation: What exactly are children learning when they learn through play? *Educational and Child Psychology*, 26(2), 40-52. <https://ezproxy.csp.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.csp.edu/docview/622219133?accountid=26720>

## HOW CAN PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM