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## The Joy of Learning

Leah Graczyk

Concordia University - Saint Paul, [graczykl@csp.edu](mailto:graczykl@csp.edu)

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**The Joy of Learning**

Leah Graczyk

Concordia University, St. Paul

ED 590 Research and Complete Capstone

Instructor: Dr. Kelly Sadlovsky

Second Reader: DeShawn Woods

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**Dedication**

Thank you to my family, who supported me throughout this journey and encouraged me when I felt overwhelmed. I could not have done it without your love and support.

**Abstract**

Early childhood education has undergone significant changes in recent years (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). The increasing focus on academic success and the rising use of technology have somewhat overshadowed the joy of learning in young children (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019). However, it's important to remember that play, often sacrificed in favor of structured academic activities, is a crucial aspect of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood. These playful learning experiences are essential in sparking the joy of learning in young children (Friedman et al., 2021). The research indicates that factors such as academic push-down, excessive use of technology, lack of play, or the absence of unstructured playtime can all have a negative impact on the joy of learning. Social-emotional learning is another vital component of early childhood education. Children with strong social-emotional skills are more motivated, can regulate their emotions, communicate and interact with others, build relationships, and solve problems (Cuartas et al., 2022). The key findings of this research highlight the importance of developmentally appropriate practice, social-emotional learning, positive teacher-child interactions, and parent involvement. This paper is a focused analysis and synthesis of these research findings.

*Keywords:* developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), early childhood education (ECE), social-emotional learning (SEL), whole child development, academic push down, joy of learning

## Chapter One: Introduction

The joy of learning is a powerful and essential aspect of early childhood education. The research concluded that the joy of learning fosters curiosity, creativity, and a lifelong love for discovery (NAEYC, 2022). However, there is a growing concern that many public schools are adopting learning expectations that are not aligned with developmentally appropriate practices for young children. This misalignment can significantly affect students' academic and emotional well-being (Harmon & Viruru, 2018).

The concept of joy in learning is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions. Joyful learning experiences are characterized by curiosity, creativity, engagement, and a sense of accomplishment (NAEYC, 2022). For preschoolers, these experiences often occur through play, exploration, and social interaction. Play-based learning has been widely recognized for its role in promoting cognitive development, social skills, and emotional well-being (Friedman et al., 2021).

### Definition of Terms

***Developmentally Appropriate Practices*** is a framework designed to promote optimal learning and development of young children to help them meet their full potential (Friedman et al., 2021). This includes developing a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. According to Burchinal et al. (2008), an essential aspect of developmentally appropriate practice is considering the whole child.

***Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)*** is an educational framework that focuses on developing social and emotional skills together with academic skills. It teaches children to recognize,

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understand, and manage their emotions, build positive relationships, set goals, show empathy for others, and make good decisions (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017).

***Whole Child Development*** is an approach to teaching/learning that aims to nurture all aspects of a child's development including physical health, social skills, cognitive development, emotional well-being, and safety. Teachers who consider the whole child look beyond academic levels and connect with children to implement curriculum, provide feedback, assess learning, and create positive teacher-child relationships (Burchinal et al., 2008).

***Early Childhood Education (ECE)*** refers to the critical stage of learning for young children between the ages of birth and eight years old. This learning takes place in various programs including daycares, preschools, and early elementary schools. The goal of ECE is to prepare students to develop a joy of learning (NAEYC, 2022).

***Joy of Learning*** emphasizes a holistic, play-based approach to education, where the primary goal is to foster a love for learning through exploration, creativity, and social interaction. This method aligns with the NAEYC's philosophy, which advocates for developmentally appropriate practices (Friedman et al., 2021).

***Academic Push-Down*** refers to the introduction of formal academic skills and a more structured approach to learning earlier than traditionally expected. This refers to increasing emphasis on developing cognitive skills while other essential aspects of early childhood development, such as social-emotional learning, receive less attention (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Academic push down is often driven by a desire to prepare children for future academic success and standardized testing (Harmon & Viruru, 2018).



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### **Importance of Topic**

There is a growing concern that many public schools are adopting learning expectations that are not aligned with developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood (NAEYC, 2020). The social-emotional development of young children is often neglected in exchange for cognitive development (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). ECE has seen a decrease in opportunities for joyful learning, less choice time, less time for centers, and less time for play (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). Socializing, making friends, and talking to people—are all skills learned in early childhood that impact later learning experiences (NAEYC, 2020). The joy of learning should be a focus in early childhood education.

Early experiences have either positive or negative effects on future development and success. Early experiences are impacted by family structure, socioeconomic status, childcare experiences, play, learning opportunities, environment, parent involvement, relationships with adults and children, health, and well-being. Some children experience more positive childhood experiences while others experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Sege & Harper Browne, 2017). Educators positively impact children by instilling a joy of learning in young children, thus minimizing the impact of adverse childhood experiences and enhancing positive experiences.

### **Scope of Research**

This research addresses the importance of social-emotional learning and instilling a joy of learning in young children to prepare them for later academic success, by asking the following research question. What developmentally appropriate practices best support the social-emotional development of preschool children and promote children's joy of learning and academic success?

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Understanding how to use developmentally appropriate practices to foster social-emotional learning requires a deep understanding of how children develop and learn.

### **Conclusion**

Researching the joy of learning in early childhood is crucial for several reasons. Early childhood, the period from birth to eight years old, is a critical time for cognitive, social, and emotional development (Friedman et al., 2021). Understanding how to foster a love of learning during these formative years can have profound and lasting impacts on a child's life. Ultimately, the goal of ECE is to create an educational environment that nurtures a lifelong love of learning (Friedman et al., 2021). By prioritizing joyful learning while thoughtfully incorporating academic elements, educators can support the holistic development of young children, ensuring children are prepared not just for school, but for life (Almon & Miller, 2011). Chapter Two included analyzed research on the changes in early childhood standards, impacts on social-emotional development, the importance of developmentally appropriate practice, teacher interactions, and family involvement.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

In recent years, children have been pushed to be ready to learn before beginning kindergarten (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). This means using the early childhood and preschool classroom as a starting point for academic education. According to Friedman et al. (2021), early childhood professionals are responsible for using developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) to create learning opportunities to meet the needs of all children across all learning domains (social-emotional, physical, and cognitive). This requires intentional planning and implementation. Social-emotional learning (SEL) includes creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Research indicated the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child, sparking a joy of learning through developmentally appropriate learning standards, positive teacher-child interactions, family involvement, and social-emotional learning (Burchinal et al., 2008).

### **Changes in Early Childhood Education Learning Standards**

According to NAEYC (2022), the idea of play and preschool has changed dramatically over time. In many settings, free play and centers have been replaced with a more rigid, teacher-led, academic curriculum. The increased emphasis on cognitive skills has led to less emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Playful learning allows children to practice and master the skills needed to be successful in the future (Miller & Almon, 2009). It is important to consider best practices for fostering social-emotional development to promote children's joy of learning.

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In the 1970s, research conducted in Germany compared play-based schools and early learning centers. This study found that by age ten, children who attended play-based schools had higher levels of academic achievement, creativity, and social-emotional skills (Almon & Miller, 2011). The recommendation was to take it slow and build foundational skills in early childhood. Early reading is not a universal indicator of later academic success, although many view it as such. Schools in Finland encourage play-based learning until children enter first grade. These students are often better prepared for academic learning upon entering first grade because support has been provided to encourage the development of social-emotional skills by focusing on pre-academic learning through play (Kluczniok et al., 2014).

### **Factors Affecting Social Emotional Development**

Social-emotional learning is essential to early childhood development (Friedman et al., 2021). Prioritizing social-emotional learning encourages children to be happy, healthy, and engaged citizens (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Academic learning standards have changed over the years, applying more pressure to cognitive development in early childhood education, increased use of technology, and less free time in the classroom (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Research tells us that all learning domains develop simultaneously (Jones & Kahn, 2017). It is important to provide equal opportunities for early learners to develop across all domains without putting excess pressure on cognitive development.

### ***Academic Pushdown***

Children are not learning the skills required for future success when the push for academic and cognitive development becomes more important than whole child development (Burchinal et al., 2008). It is important to use developmentally appropriate practices when

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planning and implementing curriculum, while also considering the needs of the whole child (Friedman et al., 2021). The introduction of standardized testing has impacted the push down of academics. Schools are often teaching 'to the test' and expecting students to master an increasing number of skills at an earlier age. According to Harmon and Viruru (2018), this can have a negative impact on social-emotional development and academic success. Students who learn information intending to pass a test are less likely to retain the information after completing the testing. Developmentally appropriate practices are not used when academic gains are pushed above other domains (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

A longitudinal study completed by Bassok et al. (2016) looked at the changes in kindergarten from 1998-2010 by comparing first-grade classes in the 1990s to kindergarten classes in 2010. Data samples were collected from over 39,000 children in 1998 and 2010 combined, researchers narrowed down the samples and reviewed 2,500 and 2,700 samples from public kindergartens in 1998 and 2010 respectively. Results showed a sharp increase in the number of kindergarten teachers who thought children should learn to read in kindergarten from 31% to 80%. The number of teachers who thought alphabet knowledge, reading, and math skills should be started before kindergarten increased by over 30%. However, teachers in 1998 and 2010 rated self-regulation and social interactions as the most important skills students should have before kindergarten. The study found that extracurriculars like art, music, and foreign languages were taught less often or not at all from 1998 to 2010. Researchers found that kindergarteners in the 90s were five times more likely to have music classes and seven times more likely to have art classes daily (Bassok et al., 2016). This suggests that kindergarten has changed over the years to become more academic. Kindergarten classrooms are still spending more time on the arts when compared to first-grade classrooms and, therefore, are not entirely

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the new first-grade, suggesting that kindergarten classrooms use developmentally appropriate practices to engage young learners.

### *Technology*

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) recognizes the importance of brain development in young children and recommends limiting the use of technology for children two to five years old to one hour per day. There are many ways for children to use technology, including playing video games, watching television/movies, watching videos online, and video chatting with family and friends (American Psychological Association, 2019). A study by Przybylski & Weinstein (2019), looked at the psychological well-being of young children. Typically, the amount of time spent using technology increased as the age of the child increased. The more time children spend interacting with technology the less time children spend interacting with peers or adults. Positive interactions with people promote social-emotional well-being (Friedman et al., 2021).

### *Lack of free time*

Free choice time and recess provide students with a multitude of opportunities to practice critical social-emotional skills. The No Child Left Behind Act is the most recent legislation that has put pressure on schools to focus on academic skills and eliminate nonacademic learning opportunities like physical education, recess, and free/choice time (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Children develop social skills by participating in various roles within different social situations (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). When social-emotional skills are explicitly taught to students, teachers can provide opportunities for students to practice these skills through planned activities in the classroom during unstructured recess or free/choice time. According to Heidemann &

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Hewitt (2010), parents worry their children will not have the literacy and math skills needed for kindergarten if playful learning is used in early childhood programs. According to research, children from low-income families often enter school lacking the experience of their peers (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play-based learning not only teaches children how to play but also how to learn.

According to Fettig et al. (2008), shared reading experiences provide ample opportunities to teach social-emotional and academic skills. A qualitative research case study by Fettig et al. (2018), discovered that using dialogic reading as a social-emotional intervention is quite effective. Dialogic reading is especially effective for teaching skills such as taking turns, problem-solving, and communicating with others (providing feedback), especially when used with small groups. The four male students in this study were five to seven years old and from low-income families. According to the research, an interventionist with training in dialogic reading implemented one hour of intervention per week over six months with fidelity. During the weekly interventions 25-30 minutes were used for direct instruction and the remaining 25-30 minutes were used for supervised play with little interaction with the interventionist. Data was collected on the number of conflicts that occurred and how often the conflicts were student-resolved; turn-taking and positive/negative feedback statements were also tracked. Results showed increased peer feedback, turn-taking, and problem-solving (Fettig et al., 2018).

### **Importance of Teacher-Child Interactions**

Teachers play a pivotal role in helping children develop social-emotional skills. Using DAP, educators provide learning opportunities for children to achieve their full potential and foster the joy of learning (NAEYC, 2020). Children practice these skills through peer and teacher

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interactions, guided play, and self-directed play. The push for high levels of academic achievement has led to education becoming more about skills, drills, and formal assessments. According to the research by Burchinal et al. (2008), positive teacher-child interactions were related to academic gains, higher uses of language in the classroom, and more opportunities for scaffolding and instruction. Feelings of safety and belonging stem from positive teacher-child relationships (Sege & Brown, 2017). Teachers must work to build quality relationships with children and support social-emotional learning before focusing heavily on academics. Once routines and relationships are established the joy of learning can grow within the classroom (Burchinal et al., 2008).

A qualitative study by Plye and Alanca (2018) investigated the connection between play and learning from the perspective of kindergarten children. Ten classrooms in Ontario, Canada, were observed for ten hours each. Interviews were conducted with 134 kindergarten students aged three to six years old. Students were shown pictures from different activities throughout the school day and asked to identify photos where learning took place. The students were also asked to define play and learning and describe what might be seen during each activity. The results of this study indicate that children understand play; children also understand what is being taught through play or whether it is just playing for fun. Students described play as a way to learn social skills: sharing, collaboration, and following rules. About half of the students said learning could happen through play, while the other half saw distinct differences in play and learning. Students whose teachers actively participated in play with their students were more likely to connect play as a time when learning happens. Students described learning opportunities as times of direct teacher instruction when teachers were absent from play in the classroom. This study highlights



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the importance of teachers being active participants in play, scaffolding learning in playful ways, and creating a collaborative environment for young learners (Plye & Alanca, 2018).

### **Family Involvement**

Children's experiences in the first years of life set the foundation for future success (Gallant, 2024). According to Cohen and Anders (2019), family involvement (parenting, responsibility for learning, and parent-teacher cooperation) in the early years encourages social-emotional and academic development as children grow. Once children begin preschool, teachers and administrators play a critical role in creating parent-preschool cooperation activities. Teachers with more education and experience often have higher parent involvement. Actively involved families have positive associations with language, social-emotional, and math skills (Cohen & Anders, 2019).

According to a Massachusetts, multi-method and multi-informant study (Cuartas et al., 2022), parental education and family income correlated with executive function and social-emotional outcomes. Data was collected on 2,309 children between the ages of three to four years old (average age 46.7 months, 49% female, 63% white, 12% Hispanic, 6% African American, 6% Asian, 13% other, 50% had a family income over \$100k, 65% had a graduate degree or higher). Data from a parental survey grouped participants into four quartiles based on parental education and family income. Those with the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) were placed in quartile one, and those with the highest SES were placed in quartile four. Parents and teachers used various tools to assess children's executive function (EF), self-regulation skills, and behaviors (MEFS, Pencil Tap, Leiter, BRIEF, BESS). The research found that children from different SES backgrounds showed sizable differences in EF, self-regulation skills, and

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behaviors. Children with low SES tended to have fewer opportunities for critical stimulation and were more at risk for chronic stressors (Cuartas et al., 2022).

Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) provide children with increased opportunities to form strong relationships, experience a sense of belonging, and practice essential skills, including communication, social interactions, self-control, motivation, relationship building, and problem-solving. PCEs also encourage positive self-image and self-worth (Gallant, 2024). These skills will help them become better learners (Cuartas et al., 2022) and develop the ability to cope in healthy ways (Gallant, 2024). Families with low SES have limited opportunities and tend to have more chronic stressors. Limiting prolonged exposure to toxic stressors and promoting positive experiences can minimize the effects of negative experiences. Research has found that neural circuits are more responsive and sensitive to experiences and environments during early childhood (Cuartas et al., 2022). Underdeveloped executive function and social-emotional skills in early childhood can cause the gaps in development to persist and widen during a child's lifespan if not minimized with positive experiences (Cuartas et al., 2022).

A German longitudinal study, AQuaFam, was conducted in 2014; the data was used as a part of the quasi-experimental study to investigate parent cooperation (Cohen & Anders, 2019). Parents and teachers used questionnaires and standardized tests. Parents and teachers reported on current levels of development for their children/students, and head teachers reported on the program's current practices for parent cooperation activities. The study involved 48 childcare centers and 242 children between the ages of 23-53 months; 54% were male, 60% were firstborn, 20% experienced poverty, and 29% did not speak German as their primary language. Headteachers ranged from 27-66 years old; 31% held a degree from a university, and the remaining teachers only had vocational training. 20% of the teachers had additional training in

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parent involvement. This study collected data on parent involvement opportunities and compared it to standardized tests to check language (communication, receptive, and expressive language) and social-emotional (prosocial and problem behavior) outcomes. Results show that teachers with additional training in parent involvement and more years of experience offer additional opportunities for involvement. Larger childcare centers used more 'door talk,' a method of parent involvement involving informal conversations at the door during drop-off and pick-up times, resulting in positive associations with vocabulary and expressive and receptive language skills. Teachers who used more parent meetings reported increased prosocial behavior. Teachers who used more door talk reported more problematic behavior (Cohen & Anders, 2019).

Children who benefit from high socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to have a mutualistic relationship between reading, executive functions, and social-emotional learning than children from low SES (Zhang & Peng, 2023). Tasks like reading require students to use executive functions, including focus and working memory. Students must be able to remember the directions given while also using new information they are learning as it applies to the task at hand. Students who could attend to tasks at school tended to be more engaged and develop a joy of learning (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP)**

According to Friedman et al. (2021), Developmentally appropriate practice is a method designed to promote optimal learning and development of young children through engaging learning opportunities and play to help children reach their full potential and develop a joy of learning. Playful learning is essential to developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms. Friedman et al. (2021) encourages playful learning opportunities to spark the joy of

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learning by finding ways to make learning fun. Meaningful learning develops when students consider the topics they are learning to be meaningful and relevant (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play is an essential avenue for teaching social-emotional and academic skills. Children learn persistence by building towers, watching them tip over, and trying again. Teachers use scaffolding to incorporate learning through play. Finding ways to make learning fun sparks the joy of learning. According to Lev Vygotsky, children show higher levels of development during play, when students can practice their skills with less pressure than during formal assessments (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010).

According to Burchinal et al. (2008), an essential aspect of developmentally appropriate practice is considering the whole child. Teachers who consider the whole child look beyond academic achievement and connect with the child during the implementation of the curriculum, provide feedback, assess, and create positive teacher-child relationships. A study by Burchinal et al. (2008), evaluated a total of 929 children (460 girls and 469 boys), from 227 state-funded preschool sites, in six states were selected (California, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, New York, and Ohio). Each of the classroom teachers held a bachelor's degree. Data was collected on most of these students in the fall and spring of preschool and kindergarten. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) was used to rate the quality of each program in the fall and spring of preschool and winter of kindergarten. All observers were trained together. The observer rated the classroom and the teacher on nine dimensions every 30 minutes throughout the day. Using a standardized measure, children were assessed individually on academic achievement, and teachers rated their social skills and behaviors on a scale. This study found that higher-quality programming led to increased social competence and fewer behavior

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problems. Focusing on quality teaching and student interactions promotes a positive climate and more learning opportunities (Burchinal et al., 2008).

### **Impact of Social-Emotional Learning**

For decades, there has been ongoing research on human development. The research shows that developmental domains overlap and develop together rather than independently and impact learning (Kluczniok et al., 2014). According to Jones & Kahn (2017), students with the social-emotional skills needed to manage emotions, navigate relationships, show persistence, and focus on a task could learn from and apply academic content. It is easy to forget that children must be taught how to navigate the world around them, solve problems, communicate with others, manage feelings, and be human in a classroom. Some children enter school with excellent foundational skills; others need more work to develop critical foundational skills (Almon & Miller, 2011).

Kluczniok et al. (2014) utilized the KiDz model, a comprehensive curriculum that supports all areas of development, including social-emotional skills, to measure three social-emotional outcomes: the joy of learning (having a positive attitude about learning), well-being (feeling about school, being comfortable in the classroom setting and ability to cope with challenges in early childhood), and worry (the way children express their concerns). The research shows higher scores for well-being and joy of learning, and lower scores for worry when using the KiDZ model. This model, which is designed to foster a positive learning environment and promote emotional resilience, better prepares children for primary schooling. Cognitive and social-emotional development are intertwined in early childhood, and one cannot reach optimal development without the other (Kluczniok et al., 2014). Educators must

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understand what typical development looks like as children progress and reach milestones.

Working with and supporting children and families requires an individualized approach

(Edwards, 2018).

The study by Kluczniok et al. (2014) is a comprehensive longitudinal investigation into the effects of the KiDZ program on social-emotional development in Germany. The study, which uses a longitudinal quasi-experimental design, tracked children's progress over a significant period. Children started the study at three years old in mixed-age classrooms, and data was collected annually over the three years children were in preschool using the KiDZ model, followed by those students in first and second grade. The first data point included 191 children, and the third data point included 172 children. Three indicators were chosen to identify social-emotional outcomes: joy of learning, well-being, and worry.

According to Shoshani and Slone (2017), behavior problems in the classroom often emerge when social-emotional skills are lacking. Creating a strong social-emotional foundation has been shown to reduce behavioral problems in early childhood and helps to set children up for future success. According to the research by Oppermann et al. (2023), which focused on the influence of gender on social-emotional development in early childhood, high-quality preschool programs saw higher social-emotional development in boys than girls. This may be due to boys developing later than girls and requiring more explicit social-emotional instruction. The research concluded that children also tended to play with same-sex peer groups with their play themes being very different; boys played more physically with less communication, while girls tended to use more communication and cooperation skills during their play (Oppermann et al., 2023).

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A qualitative study by Shoshani and Slone (2017), included 315 preschool children aged three to six and a half years old (153 girls, 162 boys) in twelve different classrooms in Israel. Students participated in either the control group (six classes, 155 students) or the intervention group (six classes, 160 students), the demographics of each of the twelve classes were similar. Data was collected at the beginning of the school year (September) and the end of the school year (June). Students self-reported on the following questionnaires: The Shortened Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children (PANAS-C), Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS), Affective Situations Test for Empathy (FASTE), and The Head-to-Toes task (HTKS). 189 parents completed The Parent Version of the Ten-Item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (PANAS-C-P), and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Teachers reported on the Approaches to Learning Scale. The teachers from the intervention group attended 34 hours of positive psychology training workshops and 32 weeks of curriculum implementation. The curriculum included units on positive emotions, engagement, achievement, and positive relationships. The control group did not receive any of the positive psychology lessons or any other formal social-emotional curriculum. Comparing the data from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year, the intervention group had significant increases in self-reported positive emotions, life satisfaction, and empathy. Parents in the intervention group report increased positive emotions and prosocial behavior. Teachers in the intervention group reported increases in positive learning behaviors and engagement. At the same time, the control group showed no change in these areas. This study did not address teacher impressions about the quality of the intervention program.

A longitudinal study by Oppermann et al. (2023), gathered data from 554 children (48% female) in 97 preschool settings in Germany. Children entered the study as three or four-year-

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olds in preschool and were followed through second grade. Data was reported by classroom teachers on the emotional self-regulation, aggressive behavior, and prosocial behavior of children in the study. Preschool programs were also rated using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) and Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E). The goal of this study was to collect data on program quality and social-emotional development related to gender. The results of this study indicate that children develop their social-emotional skills over time. Girls tended to show higher social-emotional skills and prosocial behavior and less aggressiveness. The quality of the preschool program impacted prosocial behavior and aggressiveness in preschool children. Quality programming was correlated to higher self-regulation and less aggressive behavior in second-grade boys and negatively impacted prosocial behavior in second-grade girls. Overall, the connection between high-quality programming and social-emotional development was dependent on gender. The results of this study are directly related to teacher ratings. Further research should be done comparing high-quality programs, based on ECERS-R and ECERS-E ratings to see if all high-quality programs report similar results (Oppermann et al., 2023).

A longitudinal study (Zhang & Peng, 2023) used data collected on students starting in kindergarten through grade five. The original data included 18,174 students; listwise deletion reduced the student sample to 7,747 students. Indirect assessments were used to collect data in the spring of grades two through five. Data was collected for reading (basic reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension), executive function (switching and working memory), social-emotional skills (self-control, externalizing problem behaviors, internalizing problem behaviors, and interpersonal skills), and socioeconomic status (parent education, occupation prestige, and income). Research findings have shown that fourth-grade socioeconomic status and executive



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function skills positively predict social-emotional learning (SEL) in fifth grade; high-performing students showed mutualistic effects (which we define as two unrelated skills that benefit from an interaction) between executive function (EF) and reading. The most significant relationship between EF, SEL, and reading was seen in students who were higher performing; the relationship increased over time from grades two through five (Zhang & Peng, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

The joy of learning is developed in early childhood. This joy is sparked when children experience playful learning opportunities and develop social-emotional skills (Friedman et al., 2021). There are many approaches to teaching social-emotional skills. The approaches differ based on the needs of the students and current skill levels. A social-emotional curriculum would guide educators in teaching critical social-emotional skills in early childhood (Kluczniok et al., 2014). Current research speaks to the importance of social-emotional learning in early childhood and beyond. The problem is that the research does not align with current practice (NAEYC, 2022). The research identifies the importance of play and social-emotional learning in early childhood education (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Current practices focus on academics and teacher-led instruction while students are experiencing less time for play or self-guided learning. Educators understand the importance of play, but with the academic pushdown, some things get left behind or forgotten because there is not enough time in the day (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Steps need to be taken to ensure educators are equipped with the tools and training needed to implement social-emotional learning opportunities in early childhood that are developmentally appropriate for young children.

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Teachers need to be properly trained in social-emotional education and the typical development of children (Kluczniok et al., 2014). Standards typically follow a progression of development but are not always age-appropriate when standards are pushed down to lower grades (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Appropriately trained teachers are better able to create a responsive classroom that intertwines all learning domains, sets goals, and scaffolds learning according to a child's current level of development (Plye & Alanca, 2018). Positive teacher-child relationships paired with quality social-emotional learning show evidence of reduced teacher burnout and turnover (Jones & Kahn, 2017). The following chapter will discuss the insights gained from the analysis and synthesis of the research, including research applications and recommendations for future research on the topic.

### **Chapter Three: Discussion, Application, and Future Studies**

Research has shown that children who have a joy of learning are better prepared for school and academic success (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). The research shows the importance of using developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) to enhance learning in all domains and avoid focusing only on cognitive development (Friedman et al., 2021). Action is required from educational stakeholders to ensure early learning standards reflect DAP and promote the joy of learning in young children.

#### **Insights Gained from the Research**

Over time, early childhood education (ECE) has changed. With a shift towards high-quality programming focusing on academic success and teaching to the test, some of the joy of learning has been lost (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Free play, a cornerstone of early childhood education, has been replaced with academic learning in many early childhood education programs (ECE) (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). This means that learning is more teacher-directed and less child-directed (NAEYC, 2022). However, it is important to remember that play is not just a pastime but an essential aspect of early learning. Through play, children can practice the skills taught in the classroom and at home (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). Fostering social-emotional learning is essential for later academic success (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Children who have time to develop their social-emotional skills in early childhood are better prepared for academic learning upon entering the primary grades (Almon & Miller, 2011). Research shows developmental domains overlap and develop together rather than independently, impacting learning (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Students who have the social-emotional skills needed to manage

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emotions, navigate relationships, show persistence, and focus on a task, can learn from, and apply academic content (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Playful learning is an important aspect of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms. Friedman et al. (2021) encourage playful learning to spark the joy of learning by finding ways to make learning fun. The recommendation is to take it slow and build foundational skills in early childhood. Early reading is not a universal indicator of later academic success, although many view it as such. (Almon & Miller, 2011). It is essential to provide children with opportunities to play and explore. Teachers who consider the whole child look beyond academic levels and connect with the child during curriculum implementation, provide feedback, assess, and create positive teacher-child relationships. High-quality programming led to increased social competence and fewer behavior problems (Burchinal et al., 2008).

Teachers and families play an essential role in developing the joy of learning. Positive teacher-child interactions lead to quality relationships and support social-emotional learning (Burchinal et al., 2008). Children understand when they are learning and when they are playing; they also understand that they can learn while they play. Teachers who set up learning environments with learning goals can scaffold play and create a collaborative learning environment (Plye & Alanca, 2018). Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a role in developing SEL, including executive function (EF), self-regulation, and social interactions. Low SES often leads to fewer opportunities, impacting social-emotional learning opportunities (Cuartas et al., 2022). Children from high SES often develop stronger EF skills, leading to better focus and working memory and higher academic achievement. Students who can attend to the tasks at hand are more successful in school, which leads to the joy of learning (Zhang & Peng, 2023).

### **Application**

Academic pushdown has changed early childhood education (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Early academic experiences should be developmentally appropriate for young learners, focusing more on playful learning opportunities and less on teacher-led academic instruction (NAEYC, 2022). According to the research, playful learning leads to higher social-emotional outcomes and a joy of learning, which results in later academic success (Almon & Miller, 2011). Teachers play a pivotal role in helping children develop social-emotional skills. Creating a welcoming environment, positive teacher-child interactions, explicitly teaching social-emotional skills, and providing playful opportunities to practice these skills leads to a love of learning (Burchinal et al., 2008). Children who enjoy learning are more likely to participate in classroom activities, exhibit curiosity, and overcome challenges (Kluczniok et al., 2014).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Shoshani and Slone (2017) researched the relationship between behaviors and social-emotional learning. The research showed a connection between the amount of training or experience a teacher had and their ability to build relationships with students. Teachers with higher levels of training were more likely to build strong relationships with students, and those students showed higher self-reports. It would be interesting to follow up with these students in another year or two to see if the positive effects of the intervention continued to be self-reported. Suppose further research continues to show a connection between teacher training and relationships. In that case, it will show the importance of quality professional development and teacher training in social-emotional development.

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Oppermann et al. (2023) researched the impact of preschool quality on social-emotional development. The research showed that higher levels of social-emotional development in boys than girls were associated with high-quality preschool programming. This study took place in Germany. Further research should compare high-quality programs worldwide, using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) and Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E) ratings to see if all high-quality programs report similar results. This would be beneficial research to compare quality programs worldwide, help identify where high-quality programs are located, and determine which areas need improvements and additional resources to become high-quality programs.

Another area that would benefit from current research is teacher training. Comparing teacher training programs across the United States with teacher training programs in other countries would benefit the early childhood profession. Not all teacher training programs focus on guided play, social-emotional learning, and developmentally appropriate practices. Comparing programs would help to identify the most critical aspects of teacher training and the benefits of quality teacher training in producing high-quality early childhood programs.

## Conclusion

Research has validated the need for social-emotional learning to promote the joy of learning in early childhood education (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Providing children with adequate time to develop their social-emotional skills ensures they are better prepared to be in social settings with peers and teachers (NAEYC, 2022). Play in preschool is an integral part of early childhood learning and helps children develop social-emotional skills (Almon & Miller, 2011). The needs of children are being neglected when children have less time to play, make choices,

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and explore their environment, thus interrupting their joy of learning. Higher-quality programming led to increased social competence and fewer behavior problems (Oppermann et al., 2023). When children feel safe at school, they are better able to learn and develop a joy for learning. (Burchinal et al., 2008). A big part of early childhood education is building relationships and encouraging whole child development. Teachers with proper training in social-emotional development have better relationships with students, and students who build strong teacher and peer relationships are more engaged in their learning (Shoshani & Slone, 2017).

The guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood require teachers to think about the whole child and provide learning opportunities that incorporate all the learning domains (Friedman et al., 2021). All developmental domains are connected, so it is essential to consider how the development of each domain impacts the others. The pedagogy of play includes wonder, delight, and choice. Playful learning is more than a free-for-all activity; it includes using student interests to guide play and model skills across learning domains (NAEYC, 2022). Play is the foundation for learning social-emotional and academic skills and promoting the joy of learning. There is a need for continued research on the connection between social-emotional learning in early childhood, the joy of learning, and later academic success.

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