

The Disappearance of Play in Kindergarten



Brittney Hagerty, Erica Klefstad, Juli Millspaw, Jenny Schnelle, and Melissa Zemel

Faulty Advisor: Simone DeVore

University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, Department of Education



Background Information

The five members of this research team are seniors majoring in early childhood education and special education. We are dedicated to the quality and development for the education of young children birth through age eight.

We strongly believe that children learn best through play and hands-on exploration. According to research children engaged in self-directed activities gain better language and social skills than children in a teacher-directed environment (Zigler, 2009). Through our research, we gained a greater understanding of how kindergarten teachers in southeastern Wisconsin engage children in play and whether they feel child initiated activities, such as play, are important.

Definitions

Engagement

"The amount of time children spend interacting with their environment in a developmentally and contextually appropriate way. Engagement has been organized by levels that form a continuum of types of behavior from non-engagement to persistence. Improving engagement can have positive effects on children's behavior, thinking and reasoning skills, and peer relationships" (McWilliam & Casey, 2008, p.8).

Play

"Play involves a free choice activity that is non-literal, self-motivated, enjoyable and process oriented. Critical to this definition is the non-literal, non-realistic aspect. This means external aspects of time, use of materials, the environment, rules of the play activity, and roles of the participants are all made up by the children playing. They are based on the child's sense of reality" (Early Childhood News, 2008).

Acknowledgments

UW-Whitewater Undergraduate Research Program
Local Area School Districts

Research Question 1:

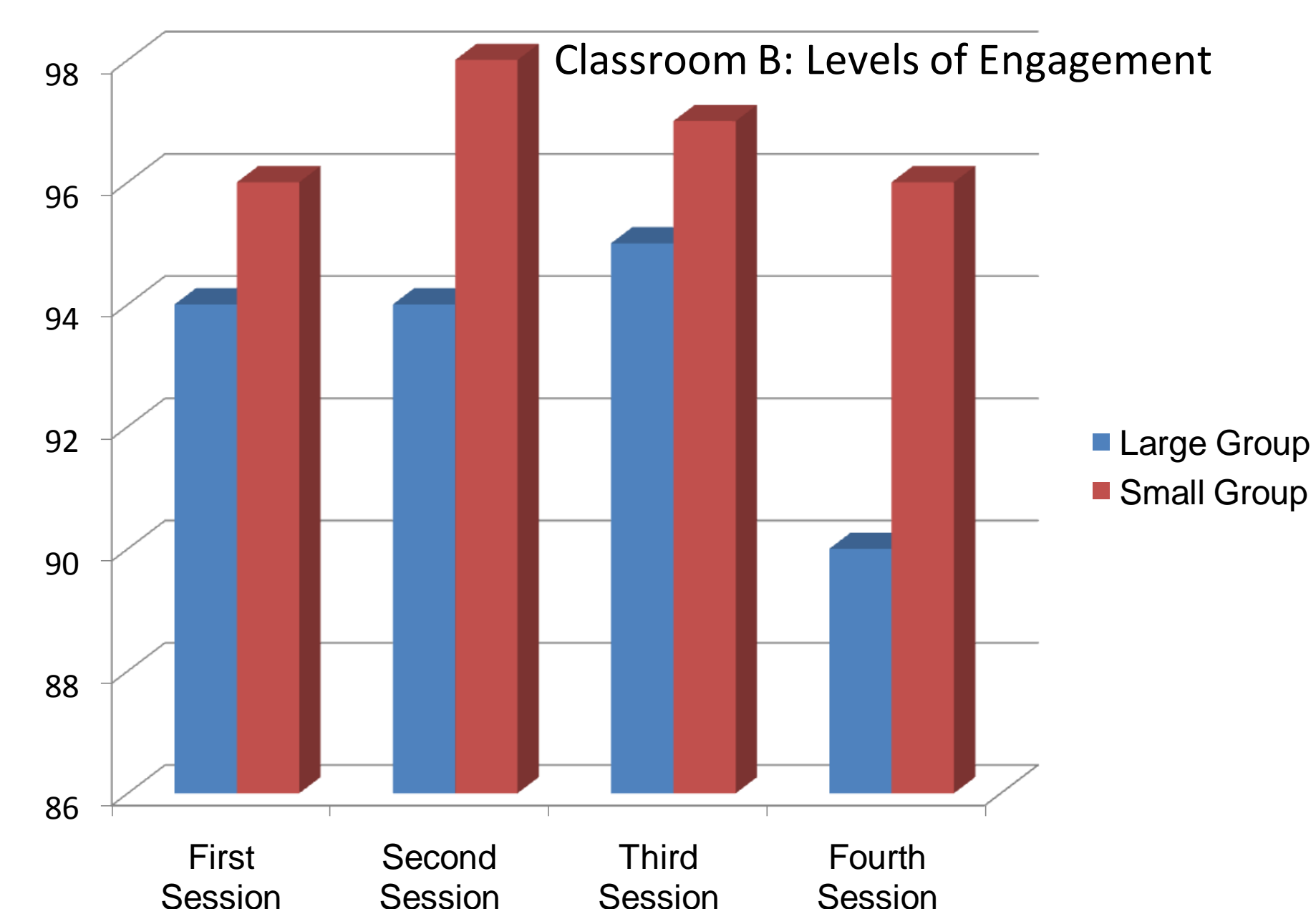
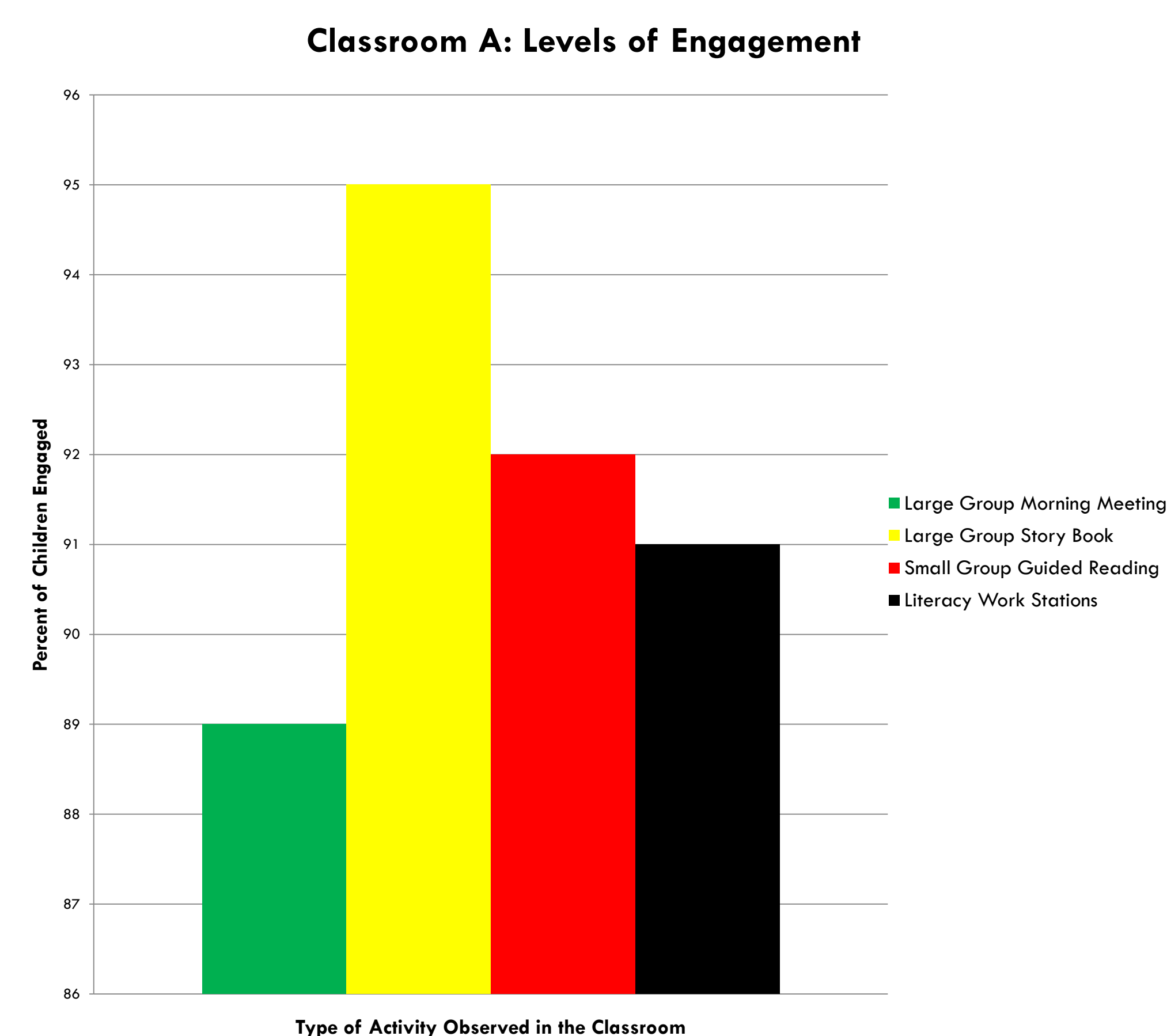
How do play based activities versus teacher directed activities affect children's engagement?

Method

We observed two kindergarten classrooms, each containing approximately 20 children. While observing, we conducted the Scale for Teachers' Assessment of Routine Engagement (STARE) using an engagement check list. While observing in classrooms for several hours, we were able to produce multiple scans. We scanned the room in intervals of 15 seconds for a 15 minute period and counted the number of children engaged in the presented activity.

Results

Quantitative data collection reveals that generally children are more highly engaged in small rather than large groups. In Classroom A, during a large group activity, a teacher really engaged children in reading which resulted in high levels of engagement.



Research Question 2:

What are kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the use of play in kindergarten?

Method

We interviewed two kindergarten teachers and one principal to gain their perspectives of the use of play in kindergarten classrooms. We asked semi-structured questions such as:

- What are your thoughts on the use of play in kindergarten?
- When do you find your students the most engaged?
- What curricula do you use in your district?

Results

The teachers and principal we interviewed showed a clear understanding of how important play is. While teachers are not allowed to have play time in kindergarten, they are finding creative ways to embed play in their day. They also create small groups during academic work so that students can engage with each other and explore concepts similar to play situations.

Limitations of the Research

We did note some limitations to this method of data collection:

- We were strangers coming into the room, bringing attention to ourselves and causing children to disengage.
- We were not able to observe when play time occurred in the classroom.
- We came into the classroom at the end of the year when the children know the rules of the school and their teacher rather than the beginning when they are learning about classroom routines and teacher expectations.
- There is no complexity for rating the engagement. For example, we did not rate whether children are talking to each other, if they are really engaged in their individual work, if they are problem solving, etc.
- We encountered difficulties using the scanning every fifteen seconds consistently.

Future Research

- Focus on assessing the complexity of engagement during various classroom activities.
- Collect more data to observe trends of the use of play in kindergarten classrooms.

Conclusion

Our predicted outcome was that even though play in kindergarten has been heavily researched and determined to be very beneficial, few classrooms actually practice using play as a designated activity. As a teacher, knowing that play is important is sometimes not enough. Kindergarten teachers should also be aware of the correlation of play and engagement and to create activities that are as engaging as play.