

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM  
(3 credits)

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# THE ROLE OF PLAY IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

Under the supervision of Daniel Leitch, PhD

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## CHAPTER 1

In a classroom, the children are seated around a semi-circle table facing the teacher. Their hands are in their laps, feet on the floor and eyes are on the book the teacher is holding. The teacher begins by saying, "Sound it out, get ready" and the children respond in unison with the three letter sounds, "mmm-aaa-t." The teacher then says, "Say it fast, get ready" and the children again respond in unison, "mat". This same procedure continues through several pages of words. "Now it is storybook time," the teacher says as she passes out small story books. The teacher begins by saying, "Get ready to read this story, first word, get ready" and the children respond in unison. The teacher continues with, "Next word, get ready" after each response from the children throughout the entire story. After reading the story in unison, the group then reads the story by each child reading an individual sentence and the teacher asks scripted questions about the story. After the story, the children work individually on a worksheet where they practice copying a sentence, matching words, answering multiple choice questions about the story and matching words to pictures. When completed with their reading group, this group of children return to the other side of the room where they work on independent worksheets as the teacher begins teaching the second reading group of the day. Is this kindergarten?

In another classroom, the children pick up their play planning notebook and begin to think about what they are going to do today. They have already been introduced to the theme of a pizza restaurant which was inspired by one of the students having had a birthday party at a local pizza restaurant. The children are also familiar with the variety of play centers throughout the room. As they work on their play plans, they begin by drawing a picture of what center they will work in, and they develop an oral sentence to go with the picture. Most children are

able to draw a line for each word they say in their sentence. Many children also begin writing some of the letters that are in the words of their oral sentence. The teacher is observing and interacting with children as they work by asking questions about their drawings and answering questions about what letter makes a certain sound. As the children finish their play plans, they show the teacher. The teacher comments on different aspects of the drawing and/or writing and encourages the children to have fun in the chosen play center. Children choose to act out roles in the pizza restaurant where they are reading menus and writing orders. They interact with each other to create a restaurant scenario. Other children choose a writing center where they are making signs and menus for the restaurant. Some have chosen to work with the dough and carry on a conversation about rolling it out and tossing it in the air. After an hour of play, the teacher rings the clean up bell and the children gather on the group carpet to discuss what they did and refer back to their play plans. The teacher then engages the group in a story about making a pizza, a story they will later act out in their pizza restaurant. Is this kindergarten?

Young children across the country attend kindergarten in public schools every day and the trend seems to be toward the first scenario of kindergarten. What children are doing in kindergarten varies from school to school, but there is an increasing trend to make kindergarten more academic, like first grade (Curwood, 2007). The first kindergarten dates back to 1839 and was started in Germany by Friedrich Froebel, one of the greatest educators in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the nearly two hundred years children have been attending kindergarten, many changes have taken place. The first kindergarten was thought of as “the place where a teacher planted seeds to help the child garden grow” (Jeynes, 2006). Froebel believed “A kindergarten curriculum rich in play would yield fruitful child development later” (Jeynes, 2006).

Many of today’s kindergartens look very different from that of the first kindergarten, and

there is much concern over the new expectations of today's kindergarten and if the new curriculum is truly in the best interest of the child. Many of today's kindergarteners are taught reading, math, science and social behaviors by direct instruction, they prepare for standardized testing, and abide by a strict schedule with little, to no time for play (Graue, 2009). Today's kindergarteners show signs of stress, and there has been a rise in anger and aggression in young children (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

Many people believe that play has been expelled from school because of the pressure to meet standards and score high on benchmark tests, and play seems to be a waste of precious instructional time (Christensen & Kelly, 2003). Children must simply play at home. As Americans try to get ahead in the global economy and try to upgrade public schools, countless districts are promoting academic kindergartens in which students are encountering skill and drill exercises, nightly homework, pressures to learn reading and math skills, and little to no time for unstructured, imaginative, exploratory playtime. Ninety percent of today's kindergarteners in Maryland's Montgomery county are able to pass an end of the year reading test as opposed to fifteen percent of kindergarteners being readers ten years ago and five percent thirty years ago (Curwood, 2007). Does the age of fast paced life, fast food, instant messaging and downloads create a culture of faster means better? Has the "No Child Left Behind" legislation put too much pressure on public school districts to prepare children for testing too early? The above scenarios are both kindergarten classrooms, but which style of kindergarten is best for developing the whole child in a developmentally appropriate manner?

### **Statement of the Problem**

The kindergarten curriculum has been transformed since its beginning in 1839 when play was considered important and crucial to child development. By considering the history of kindergarten, are we able to justify the changes it has undergone in support of child development? What factors are responsible for the changes in the kindergarten curriculum and what role does play have in today's kindergarten? What are the benefits of a play based curriculum in kindergarten? What are the best practices for the future of our kindergarten students?

### **Delimitations of Research**

The research will be conducted through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over 30 days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through Wilson Database, EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics included "kindergarten and play" and "play".

### **Method of Approach**

A review of literature relating to research, studies and anecdotal evidence of the role of play in kindergarten over time and the current kindergarten curriculum was conducted. The findings were summarized and synthesized and recommendations made.

## **CHAPTER 2**

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### THE HISTORY OF KINDERGARTEN

Friedrich Froebel opened the first kindergarten in 1839 in Germany. The United States adopted his model and began opening kindergarten classrooms in the 1850's (Jeynes, 2006). The first kindergarten in the United States was open in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1856 by Margarethe Schurz and was influenced by Froebel's kindergarten in Germany (Wisconsin Historical Society, 2011). Froebel's German kindergarten, or literally, child's garden, model assumed that four and five year olds were still immature and not ready for the real world and the academic rigor of elementary school, however the pre-first grade years were crucial to children's development. The Froebel kindergarten model placed an emphasis on integrity over knowledge in a child's growth. An effective teacher not only encouraged the quest for knowledge, but also shaped children into loving, kind and conscientious citizens. The kindergarten curriculum was dedicated to developing the mind, the spirit and the body all at the same time. Froebel believed that cognitive instruction focused on training the five senses, and if academic subjects were introduced too strict, children would lose their inherent joy in learning. Froebel proposed a number of ways that teachers could develop cognitive and sensory development, one of which was play. He believed play contributed to the cognitive and moral development. Froebel's kindergarten model acknowledged play as a means to practice self restraint, cooperation, and adherence to rules which leads to self disciplined, social and law abiding adults (Jeynes, 2006).

Froebel's philosophy revolved around three main ideas: the unity of creation, respect for children as individuals, and the importance of play in children's education. Froebel viewed the teacher's role as one of guiding the child through activities and aiding the child in connecting their experiences with each other (Manning, 2005). This role is similar to the teachings of Vygotsky

where the teacher's role is to provide experiences that allow the child to construct knowledge, and the children are active in acquiring such knowledge. Vygotsky believed that the teacher must provide a scaffold to move to higher levels of learning (Bodrova, & Leong, 1996). Piaget's theory also coincided with the idea that children learn best by hands on experiences. Children are able to learn how to read, write, spell, speak and solve math problems in a natural way in a child centered atmosphere at their own speed and interest level (S. A. Miller, 2005).

In the past, kindergarten in the United States revolved around the philosophies of these great theorists as well as many others. Play was an important part of learning through experiences. Children were not taught by direct instruction and were not expected to learn how to read, write and perform math tasks at this early stage. Kindergarten was an introduction to school, but still valued the developmental level and needs of each individual child.

#### CHANGES IN KINDERGARTEN

Twenty years ago, kindergarten was extremely child-centered and child-initiated, and it was not primarily focused on teaching children cognitive type skills such as reading, writing and mathematics (Hardy, 2009). Over the past 40 years, the United States kindergarten curriculum has shifted away from the Froebel Model. This shift is evident in three major events according to Jeynes (2006). The first event began with the removal of prayer and bible reading from kindergarten classrooms. Christian values were the foundation of character and moral education in the kindergarten curriculum. This left a void in the curriculum which began to be filled with academic subject matter and tests. This movement failed to produce a moral foundation in children and instead focused on test preparation and performance. By omitting the moral component of education, children today find it more difficult to develop the qualities necessary to be successful citizens.

The second event, decline in achievement test scores, occurred from 1963 to 1980 when SAT scores dropped for 17 consecutive years. This resulted in reforms for America's educational system. Some social trends were also noted during this time: divorce rates began to soar and there was a rise in the use of illegal drugs. Some theorists claimed that it was more than a coincidence that American public schools rejected Froebel's kindergarten model in the precise year that scores began to decline. In 1983, the release of "A Nation At Risk" facilitated an emphasis on basic skills. The "Back to the Basics" movement then gained popularity. Some argued that by teaching more reading and math in American schools, educational outcomes would improve.

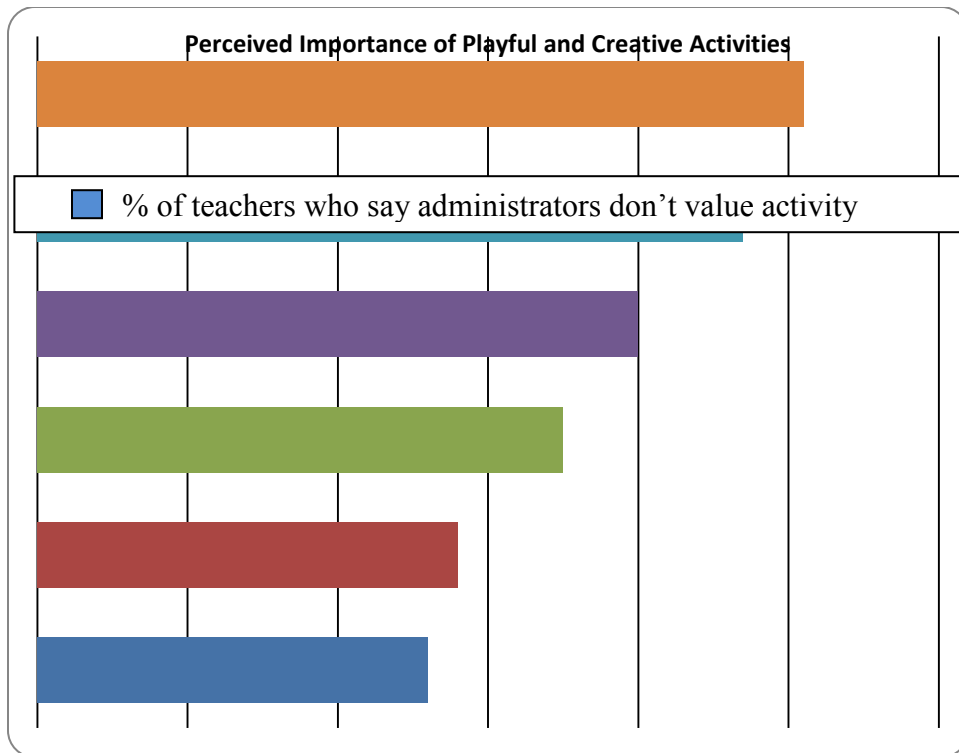
The third event beginning in the 1990's to the present brings concern about the academic achievement gap between suburban and inner-city schools. President Clinton called for standardized testing in hopes of increasing the accountability in the system and to ensure that urban educators taught basic skills (Jeynes, 2006). President George Bush brought forth the "No Child Left Behind" initiative which warns schools that failure to give adequate instruction will result in loss of federal funding and puts pressure on schools to prepare children for testing in the third grade (Curwood, 2007). As a result, kindergarten is primarily focused on teaching literacy and math skills to prepare children for upcoming tests in third grade (Hardy, 2009).

The twentieth century continues to put pressures on public schools with President Obama's "Race to the Top" policies which have further pushed many schools to increase testing in order to collect vast amounts of data (McMahon, 2011). In August of 2010, the National Standards were introduced as a way to replace today's uneven system of "every state for itself" to standards set for all. The Alliance for Childhood distributed a letter calling for suspension of further work on the K-3 standards arguing that they would "lead to long hours of instruction in literacy and math,

inappropriate testing and didactic instruction that would cut off children's initiative, curiosity and imagination, limiting their later engagement in school and the work place, not to mention responsible citizenship" (Guernsey, 2010). The philosophies of the original Froebel kindergarten have undertaken serious changes due to a combination of these measures.

## CURRENT PRACTICES IN KINDERGARTEN

These events have led to the development of academic programs in kindergarten that are intended to meet such standards and regulations. They ignore the early childhood research base of many years. Our current kindergarten practices have resulted in moving elementary academics into the kindergarten curriculum. Newspapers regularly report a nationwide trend that playtime in kindergarten has been replaced with more academics which refers to increased literacy skills, practice through worksheets, workbooks, flashcards and computerized drills. Play is characterized as a trivial activity, an expendable frill with little potential for improving achievement (Wohlwend, 2008). Many administrators see less formal kindergarten activities as wasting valuable instructional time that could raise student achievement (Graue, 2009). Others believe that kindergarteners need to settle down and engage in serious learning. They see play as a waste of time, or worse, a descent into chaos (Lustig, 2009). When teachers were asked what the main obstacle for implementing play in kindergarten was, they reported that it was not incorporated in their prescribed curriculum. Teachers also felt that there was a conflict between their views and the perceived views of administrators about the importance of playful and creative activities. Teachers felt that these activities were not valued as highly by school administrators as shown in the graph below (E. Miller & Almon, 2009). The reality is that if teachers do not feel that administrators value play, they will not incorporate play into their curriculum or daily routine.



*Figure 1.* Perceived Importance of Playful and Creative Activities. This figure illustrates the percentage of teachers who say administrators don't value each type of playful or creative activity.

An increasing number of kindergarten teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. This style of teaching, known as direct instruction, gives the adults the authority to tell children what to do and what to think rather than acting as guides who assist children in puzzling through situations and deciding for themselves what they should do (E. Miller & Almon, 2009). These practices, which are not well grounded in research, violate long established principles of development and good teaching (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

A study by HighScope Educational Research Foundation on Preschool Curriculum Comparison assessed which of three preschool curriculum models, Direct Instruction, HighScope or Nursery School, were the most effective for young children living in poverty. The latter two models promote child initiated activities, while Direct Instruction is a teacher initiated, scripted

program. It found that on sixty eight at-risk children from low income families, direct instruction showed a rise in IQ and other academic gains for the first year, but by age 15, the Direct Instruction group reported committing two and a half times as many acts of misconduct as the HighScope group. At age twenty three, compared to the other curriculum groups, the Direct Instruction group had three times as many felony arrests per person, especially those involving property crimes, and forty seven percent of the Direct Instruction group were treated for emotional impairment or disturbance during their schooling, as compared to only six percent of either of the other curriculum groups. The children from the child initiated classrooms had significantly fewer felony arrests, fewer years of special education for emotional impairment, and completed higher levels of schooling. What processes make HighScope or Nursery School preschool curricula improve adult outcomes better than preschool curriculum based on Direct Instruction? Curriculum comparisons suggest that planning and social reasoning are important ingredients of executive functioning and social intelligence that helped shape young children's minds, thus contributing to their success later in life. The early childhood years are important for the development of non-cognitive skills and self-regulation. These early skills provide the foundation for later success in life. Children in both HighScope and Nursery School groups had more control over their preschool classroom environments and were able to exercise their choices there in a much more systematic fashion. Both HighScope and Nursery School based their programs on what we now call developmentally appropriate practices. There were opportunities in the classroom to put children in charge of parts of their day, to learn from them, and to share in their interests. Direct Instruction group instruction was based on workbooks and preset objectives and exercises that led to those objectives. Curriculum comparisons point out that unlike the HighScope and Nursery School approaches, Direct Instruction focused on

academic objectives, not on planning or social objectives. This strategy, while successful short-term, did not lead to long-term improved outcomes for children served (HighScope, 2010). Other evidence suggests that high doses of phonics drills do not in the long term produce students who love reading and understand what they read (E. Miller & Almon, 2011).

Another reason that play has been expelled from school is because of the pressures to meet standards and score well on high stakes tests (Christensen & Kelly, 2003). Schools begin preparing for test taking the minute children walk through the door, but some argue that these benchmarks within the test don't recognize the important differences in children (D'Ordine, 2002). Instead of building on the knowledge and experiences children have and celebrating the uniqueness of each child, schools are trying to create children who all know the same thing and are similar to a factory made product. In order to meet standards and pass these tests, there is no time for play and natural development. A recent Public Agenda survey reported that 71% of teachers think there are too many standardized tests (Schroeder, 2007). According to the Childhood Alliance, testing is a highly unreliable method for assessing individual children (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

Kindergarten is now built on a model of content rather than the needs of children. Kindergarten schedules are segmented into reading, math and science. Play, which once served as the core of kindergarten, is pushed out to ensure each classroom has accomplished the required number of minutes of academics (Graue, 2009). Learning to read and doing math sooner has created scores that are soaring, but this may come at the expense of other skills children need to learn, such as; self reliance, problem solving and spatial thinking (Curwood, 2007). Unfortunately, teachers are being forced to teach these content related skills as opposed to meeting the needs of these young learners. There is little time for active exploration in the arts, science or

social studies. Children have limited availability to the use of concrete materials such as blocks and paint brushes. There is more and more independent paper and pencil work placed upon kindergarteners in today's classrooms. Opportunities for conversation among children and between children and adults have become limited (Egertson, 1987). The widespread feeling is that children can play at home. The pressures from the government to meet inappropriate expectations have also caused children to exhibit a rise in anger and aggression. This has been reflected in increasing reports of severe behavior problems. The removal of play, a natural stress reliever, does not give children an outlet to manage their feelings (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

Furthermore, there have been inappropriate expectations placed upon children in today's typical kindergarten classroom. Standards for literacy in kindergarten have no basis in child development research or knowledge for that kind of expectation—it is setting kids up to fail (Curwood, 2007). Many kindergarten students are required to identify all letters and letter sounds, blend sounds and be able to read thirty high frequency words. They must also be able to identify and write numbers to one hundred, count by ones, fives and tens, and recognize basic shapes. Kindergarten student's hand-eye and fine motor coordination is not fully developed and this makes these kinds of paper pencil activities very frustrating as well as academically challenging (S. A. Miller, 2005). Unfortunately too many kindergarteners are learning that in kindergarten they are not smart enough or are lacking skills that are expected of them (Plevyak & Morris, 2002).

The current kindergarten practice is anything but a child's garden. It emphasizes strict academics, standardized testing and is merely beginning the elementary years a year earlier. "The policy issues involved largely come down to a matter of whether Americans want kindergarteners to serve a foundational role in which a child blooms like a flower in a garden and begins to experience some of the social, creative, spiritual, and academic joys of life. The alternative

possibility is that kindergartens continue along current trends and function increasingly as a first- or second-grade class” (Jeynes, 2006).

Current research suggests that Froebel’s approach to kindergarten benefits the development of a young child more than focusing on standardized testing. Recent studies suggest that the moral, behavioral and self regulatory qualities to which Froebel and other educators subscribed more accurately determine school readiness rather than cognitive or academic skills. Other researchers such as Piaget and Vygotsky also defended the relevance of play in the development of children. They believed that play encourages the moral quality of self-restraint and the ability to follow rules and cooperate with others. Jeynes argues that focusing on standardized tests overlooks the broader development of children and hurries children through the developmental process. Testing may also represent a “miseducation” because it may force cognitive development on your children rather than working with their natural development (Jeynes, 2006).

#### IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN KINDERGARTEN

The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has recognized play as a right of every child because it is so important to optimal child development and healthy brain growth (Ginsburg, 2007). Pretend play engages many areas of the brain because it involves emotion, cognition, language, and sensorimotor actions, and therefore it may promote the development of dense synaptic connections (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003). A young child's mind is primed for learning, but needs early experiences to wire the neural circuits that facilitate learning. Experiences that the five senses take in help build the connections that guide brain development. These sensory experiences, which are encountered in play, direct brain cells to their location and reinforce the synaptic connections between brain cells. As the synapses in a child's brain are

strengthened through repeated experiences, connections and pathways are formed that structure the way a child learns. If a pathway is not used, it's eliminated based on the "use it or lose it" principle (Brotherson, 2005).

Research shows that play is the means for social, physical, academic, emotional and moral development in young children. Kindergarteners use play to make sense of their world, act out situations to gain better understanding, and manipulate materials to create meaning. Through the use of play children are able to overcome challenges in their lives, keep emotional balance and acquire the readiness to learn (Carlsson-Paige, 2008).

Play facilitates the growth of reasoning abilities. When children ask questions, make inferences and draw conclusions, they are using higher level thinking skills. Play is also a vital part of language development in children. Both reasoning and language development establish a strong foundation for reading and comprehension in years to come (Curwood, 2007). Play, in contrast to direct instruction, allows children to choose their own level of challenge and to be stretched by others in a low stress atmosphere. A review of numerous studies on play found that play contributes to advances in verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem solving strategies, cooperation, empathy and group participation (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). These are all qualities that are possessed by successful students. When children are given the opportunity to construct all of these ideas through play, which is a natural activity without pressures and stress, they will build lasting memories that make sense to them and begin a strong foundation for future academic subjects.

A play based kindergarten does not base its curriculum on specific skills, but rather lays the importance on the developmental needs of each individual child. It offers a wide variety of

experiences that are rich in conversation and inviting to the senses. A variety of materials are available that challenge children from easy to difficult and large blocks of time are allowed for children to manipulate and experiment with materials. Independence and responsibility are strongly promoted through child initiated activities (Egertson, 1987). The teacher acts as a facilitator, not as a director, and helps to engage children in activities of their interest and ability level.

A 2007 study collected data on children who were taught using a Vygotskian method, learning through social context and constructing knowledge through language and experience, found that they scored significantly higher than their counterparts on tests such as the ability to keep behaviors in check, control impulses and ability to focus. These are basic skills needed for learning to read (Guernsey, 2010). Children who lack these mental tools or never have the opportunity to develop them may find it difficult to attend to academic activities and will potentially struggle in their future education.

Through the experiences of dramatic play children are able to practice social skills. Studies have shown that children who engage in complex socio-dramatic play develop higher levels of thinking, stronger language skills, better social skills, more empathy and more imagination than children who do not play in this way (Lustig, 2009). As children play, they learn to control their impulses to stay within the boundaries of the roles they create and by doing so they develop more self-regulatory social behaviors. For example, a child pretending to be the mom must stay in the role of the mom and attend to the duties of the mom. This child must fight the impulse to break character and by doing so is developing self regulatory skills. These important skills will be needed when this same child must fight the impulses to daydream in class instead of listening to the teacher during reading instruction. Building these skills in a

comfortable, non threatening way seems to be beneficial for children. Children may be more apt to use skills they develop through experiences that are meaningful than using skills that have been dictated in high stress situations. There is also a connection of children who have these self regulatory skills to having higher achievement in school. “A definitive meta-analysis of more than one hundred studies showed that students who had social and emotional learning not only got along better with others, but also learned more effectively and had higher grades and achievement test scores” (Carlsson-Paige, 2008).

## VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF KINDERGARTEN

Will our current trend in kindergarten continue, or will educators look at the evidence in support of play and return to what kindergarten once was? This question is on the minds of many educators across the nation. “Making time for play, valuing its contribution to literacy development, and supporting its high-level implementation have greater potential for increasing achievement than removing play” (Christensen & Kelly, 2003). Miller suggests six recommendations for the future of our kindergarten (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

1. Restore child-initiated play and experiential learning with active support of teachers.
2. Reassess kindergarten standards to ensure they promote developmentally appropriate practices.
3. End the inappropriate use of standardized tests.
4. Expand early childhood research agenda to examine the long term impact of current kindergarten practices.
5. Give teachers of early childhood education first-rate preparation.
6. Use the crisis of play’s disappearance from kindergarten to rally organizations

to create a national movement for play in schools and communities.

Teachers can encourage and facilitate play in their classrooms by asking questions, providing open-ended materials, using new vocabulary and encouraging social cooperation between classmates (Curwood, 2007). Teachers should observe children's play to gain knowledge of the children's interests and concerns. Teachers can encourage and scaffold play by introducing new materials or new directions, asking open-ended questions and giving suggestions to challenge children in new ways (Carlsson-Paige, 2008).

Should the United States look at the global community to be aware of what is successful in other countries? Finland, a country that tends to lead the world in assessments in literacy, math and science does not start formal schooling until the age of seven. Before formal schooling, play is the primary work of children (Curwood, 2007). China and Japan also use a play-base, experiential approach to learning until second grade. These countries are also known for their success on international education comparisons (Kindergarten: All work and no play? 2009). Germany experienced educational reform in the 1970's when their play-based kindergartens were changed into centers for cognitive achievement, but as the result of research the German kindergarten went back to play-based curriculum. This research compared 50 play-based classes with 50 early learning centers and found that by age 10 the children who had played in kindergarten excelled over the others in a variety of ways— they were more advanced in reading and math, were better adjusted socially and emotionally, and they excelled in creativity, intelligence and oral expression (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

A study conducted in Florida in urban, disadvantaged neighborhood charter schools of 156 children looked at children's perceptions of their schools in both a successful school and an unsuccessful school. This study found that children in the unsuccessful school were more

likely to identify school as being about academics and tests and was actually less successful academically later on. Children attending the successful school were more likely to identify school with friends, play and fun and less about the academics. “Is it possible that emphasizing academics and testing early in a child’s school career makes school a less-desirable place to be overall? Is it possible that such emphasis early on was actually detrimental to children’s later learning?” The results of this study suggest possible distinctions between the ways that children perceive their schools at a successful and an unsuccessful school (DeMarie, 2010).

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the review of existing literature related to play in kindergarten the following conclusions can be drawn. Play is an important part of child development and must be facilitated by teachers in the kindergarten classroom. The research shows that by removing play from the kindergarten classroom, children will be lacking essential skills needed for further education. As Americans continue to compete in a global economy the educational system must prepare children the best way possible. Years of research have shown that children learn through playful activities, and it is the teacher’s role to facilitate those activities and scaffold children to the next level of challenge. Play helps a child's brain develop and nourishes the child's potential for a lifetime.

A young child’s body is not ready to sit and listen to lectures or work on paper and pencil activities for extended periods of time. This causes much frustration and stress for children. Kindergartener’s self esteem is affected by expecting them to complete activities that are too difficult in which they are not ready for.

Kindergarten has been through a vast amount of change over the years. The causes of these changes have not always been grounded in good research. The government puts emphasis on students to exceed on international tests, and therefore sets high standards for achievement. This puts pressures on schools and administrators to meet such standards. Unfortunately, governmental leaders have not taken into consideration child development research or given direction on how to meet such standards. Many administrators believe that if more is taught earlier, more content can be taught later, therefore, increasing our student's knowledge base. The problem lies within recognizing the developmental levels of children and creating expectations that are much too high. By eliminating social education through play, which teaches children how to learn and be socially adjusted for learning, we are setting children up for failure. There is not adequate research which supports moving academic subjects into the kindergarten curriculum. Earlier and faster does not always mean more and better.

Other countries have shown that play in the early years yields higher achieving students in the latter years. Countries that continue to score highest on international tests seem to all have similar approaches to education in the early years—learning through play and introducing academic subjects after age seven. Although the government continues to pass legislation that demands higher standards, we must keep formal education for the years in school when children are capable and developmentally ready for such demands. Children with a strong foundation of learning through play in the early years will be more prepared and ready to learn academic subjects. They will have developed self-regulatory skills which will enable them to be more focused and independent. If the trend of direct instruction continues, students will continue to wait for someone else to tell them what to do and how to do it. Play helps to develop imagination and innovative minds that students facing the global economy will need for survival.

The Alliance for Childhood has drafted a statement, endorsed by hundreds of concerned citizens and organizations that is a call to action on the education of young children. It supports universal preschool that emphasizes experiential, hands-on activities, open-ended creative play and caring human relationships. Current kindergarten education has focused on intense academic instruction with little or no time for child initiated learning, and if such practices were effective there would be better long term results by now. The Alliance calls for a reversal of the pushing down the curriculum. “Education is not a race where the prize goes to the one who finishes first” (E. Miller & Almon, 2009). Current trends in education put pressure and stress in children’s lives, and the Alliance calls for research into what causes increased levels of anger and misbehavior in young children. The Alliance also supports teacher education that emphasizes the full development of the child including the importance of play, nurtures children’s innate love of learning and supports teachers’ own capacities for creativity, autonomy and integrity. The Alliance for Childhood is concerned with the trends of education today which are fueled by political pressures. It considers the unproven methods of academic instruction and unreliable standardized testing to be damaging to young children’s healthy development and undermines learning (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

Vivian Gussin Paley states, “A kindergarten without a substantial playtime puts everyone at a disadvantage, for play is still the primary reality for its members. Play contains the only set of circumstances children understand from beginning to end. . . . Let us open our kindergartens again to the world’s most natural learning tool: play” (E. Miller & Almon, 2009).

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