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The Impact of Explicit Social Skills Instruction and Increased Play in a Kindergarten Special Education Classroom

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The Impact of Explicit Social Skills Instruction and Increased Play in a Kindergarten Special

Education Classroom

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Review of the Literature.....	5
Methods	15
Participants.....	17
Data Collection.....	19
Results	22
Data Analysis.....	22
Discussion.....	24
Summary of Major Findings.....	24
Limitation of the Study.....	25
Further Study.....	26
Conclusion.....	27
References	28
Appendices.....	32

Abstract

The purpose of this action research project is to determine the impact of explicit social skills instruction and an increased amount of play in a kindergarten special education classroom. Data was collected to determine the effect that this intervention had on students' behavior and academic progress. Data was collected through student referral data and Individualized Education Plan progress monitoring data. Analysis of the data collected suggested that this explicit social skills instruction and increase in play had a positive impact on student behavior in the school setting.

Keywords: social skills, play, learning, special education, Autism

The Impact of Explicit Social Skills Instruction and Increased Play in a Kindergarten Special Education Classroom

A child's kindergarten school year is an opportunity to grow socially, emotionally, and academically through play, direct instruction, and interactions with other same aged peers. It is an opportunity to form an understanding of the expectations within a school setting and to develop the foundation for learning that will follow throughout the child's educational career. The integration of play is an important component in the kindergarten setting and has been proven to have a significant, positive impact for children. In addition, explicit social skills instruction plays a crucial role in a kindergarten curriculum to assist young children with the tools and strategies needed to manage emotions and promote positive social interactions. This action research will explore the effects of increased explicit social skills instruction and increased play in a kindergarten special education classroom.

As children transition into elementary school, many students may have delays in social and emotional skills. Students without previous exposure to prekindergarten education may have no prior experience in a formal education setting and may need additional support to display kindergarten readiness in the area of social-emotional skills. In the classroom setting, these delays in social skills may result in conflict amongst peers (sharing, communicating, playing together), difficulties paying attention or tending to a task, displaying disruptive behaviors, or potentially exhibiting physical aggression towards others. Without any prior social skills instruction and limited interactions with same-aged peers, these students may be unaware of how to appropriately act in a school setting. Teachers at the beginning of the kindergarten school year spend a significant amount of time teaching procedures such as raising hands to speak, how to line up, how to ask permission to use the restroom, and how to walk in the hallway. In

addition to teaching these procedural expectations, a significant amount of time should also be spent explicitly teaching social skills to promote positive interactions and to provide students with the tools they need to manage their emotions and resolve conflicts.

The initial portion of this action research will review literature describing the benefits and hesitations of incorporating more play and social skills instruction in the classroom setting. It will describe the social deficits that are often present with incoming kindergarteners and the reasoning behind the need for additional interventions. This portion will include definitions and descriptions of age appropriate play and social skills instruction, as well as research describing the long-term effects of this inclusion. The paper will then include a detailed description of the action research completed in a kindergarten special education classroom that trialed an intervention with an increase in play and explicit social skills instruction. Details regarding the participants, materials utilized for interventions, and data collected will be described in this paper. The study will then proceed to share the results of the action research while determining the effects of increased play and explicit social skills instruction in the kindergarten special education classroom.

Review of the Literature

In the early childhood setting, children begin to learn how to interact with other children and follow the social norms of a formal educational setting. Studies have shown that many students enter kindergarten lacking these fundamental social skills that are a necessary component to success in the classroom and throughout a child's educational career. During this early childhood phase of a child's life, play and explicit social skills instruction are important to develop executive functioning skills, strengthen motor skills, stimulate creativity, and grow cognitively. There are various stages of play that children will progress through, with each phase

helping children develop new skills. Throughout these stages, adults play a key role in supporting play while allowing children to learn independently, rather than taking control of the play. In addition to play, explicit social skills instruction allows students to learn collaborative skills and practice these skills through play or an activity. Just as children progress through phases of play, they also progress in the area of social emotional skills with each phase becoming more complex.

“The National Academy of Sciences reported that 60% of children enter school with the cognitive skills needed to be successful, but only 40% have the social-emotional skills needed to succeed in kindergarten” (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012, p. 398). There are various social and emotional skills that young children need to be successful in the educational environment and teachers cannot assume that their students have had previous instruction to strengthen these skills or form a child’s awareness of these skills. The fact that 60% of students are lacking the social skills needed to be successful in kindergarten reinforces the idea that more time needs to be spent on building these social-emotional skills. According to Ashdown and Bernard, researchers “have described key social-emotional skills that young children need as they enter school, including self-confidence, the capacity to develop positive relationships with peers and adults, concentration and persistence on challenging tasks, an ability to effectively communicate emotions, an ability to listen to instructions and be attentive, and skills in solving social problems” (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012, p. 397). Without these social-emotional skills, many of these young children will have challenges in the formal educational setting. As consideration is given to the expectations that are presented in a typical kindergarten classroom, all of these skills identified by Ashdown and Bernard are crucial in finding success in the daily kindergarten structure. Knowing that social-emotional skills is an area in which many children do not display

readiness when entering kindergarten, schools need to ensure that appropriate interventions are put into place to strengthen these skills.

Ashdown and Bernard explored the effects of a social-emotional learning curriculum, You Can Do It! Early Childhood Program, on young children in Australia. The researchers looked at children's academics, problem behaviors, emotional well-being, and social emotional competencies throughout this study. Data from this study, collected from questionnaires and students' reading level information, determined that the integration of this social-emotional learning curriculum was beneficial for students. The students participating in the social-emotional learning curriculum made more growth in social-emotional competencies, reading abilities, and various other social skills than their peers who did not receive the You Can Do It! Early Childhood Program intervention (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

According to the Oxford Dictionary, play can be defined as engaging "in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose" (Oxford Dictionary, 2010, para. 2). Although this definition describes the lack of a practical purpose, play has a very crucial role in child development and is very purposeful in the educational setting. Play is an important component of children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. As Mawson (2010) describes, children who engage in a significant amount of peer interactive play "demonstrate more competent emotional-regulation, initiation, self-determination, and receptive vocabulary skills, and are less likely to be aggressive, shy or withdrawn. They have greater cognitive, social, and movement coordination outcomes" (Mawson, 2010, p. 8). As it has been shown that these skills are lacking in many children as they enter kindergarten, this integration of more peer interactive play is suggested to have a positive effect to help develop and continue to strengthen these skills for young children.

Marie Hartwell-Walker (2018) described how play is necessary for healthy brain development, to stimulate a child's creativity and imagination, to develop a child's executive functioning skills, and to develop a child's theory of mind. Play allows the brain to make connections between nerve cells, which helps develop gross motor skills and fine motor skills. Play stimulates a child's imagination and, as studies have shown, children who utilize their imagination are more creative as adults. Executive functioning skills are strengthened through play, which allows children to remember details, plan and organize, manage time and attention, and decide actions and words that are and are not appropriate to do or say. These executive functioning skills also help children manage emotions and develop self-control and self-discipline. The ability to walk in someone else's shoes is often referred to as 'theory of mind'. This 'theory of mind' is strengthened through play, as children begin to understand playmates' thoughts and feelings, while developing compassion and strengthen collaboration skills. Allowing time for free play can also strengthen physical skills, emotional regulation skills, the ability to get along with others, flexible thinking, and develop a greater confidence to try new things or think outside of the box (Hartwell-Walker, 2018).

There are various stages of play that children progress through and each stage of play allows children to build on different skills. Each stage is an important component of child development and builds on physical skills, cognitive skills, and social emotional skills. In the 1932 journal titled "Social Participation Among Preschool Children," researcher Mildred Parten observed and researched growth and development through play in young children. Throughout her research, Mildred Parten identified six stages of play. These six stages of play, starting at birth, explore how social play changes over time for children. This first stage of play that Mildred Parten (1932), identified is called Unoccupied Play. This stage of play includes young

babies and children exploring items around them. This form of play includes the random movements that infants make and is the beginning of play. Children in the Unoccupied Play stage are learning how the world works and building the foundation for the remaining five play stages. The second stage of play identified by Mildred Parten (1932) is Solitary Play. This involves children playing on their own and entertaining themselves without any other social interactions. This stage is preparing children to play with others, as they explore freely, develop motor skills, and develop cognitive skills. The third stage of play is called Onlooker Play. This is when a child watches others play without joining in. This is a normal part of play development and allows children to learn about social interactions, relationships, and rules of play by watching others. The fourth stage of play identified by Mildred Parten (1932), Parallel Play, is when children play next to each other but do not engage with one another. This stage is typically found with toddlers and allows children to play side-by-side with similar interests and goals in preparation for upcoming stages of play involving more interactions. Although it may seem as if interactions are not occurring during this stage, children in Parallel Play are paying close attention to one another. The fifth stage of play is Associative Play, which is the first stage in which children are more interested in the other players involved, rather than a sole interest in the object alone. This stage allows the child to practice the skills that were acquired in previous stages as they begin to interact with others through play. The last stage of play that Mildred Parten (1932) identified is Cooperative Play. This stage involves cooperative efforts between all engaged in play. This advanced skill involves sharing, taking turns, establishing rules, and negotiating control. Children will utilize problem solving skills and conflict resolution skills as they navigate through the inevitable conflicts that will arise in this stage of play.

All six stages of play, as identified by Mildred Parten, are significant in the developmental phase for children. These stages build upon one another and help children understand concepts of play, social interactions, strengthen motor skills, and grow cognitively. As the stages advance, children also learn important problem solving and conflict resolution skills. All children are unique and individual, meaning each child will advance through the stages of play at their own pace. It is important that adults support children during these play stages to encourage creativity and the use of imagination.

In addition to these stages of play, outdoor play is important to incorporate into a child's daily schedule. Throughout history, recess has been an important component in the elementary educational setting but, as Brez and Sheets (2017) explain, with the pressures to accomplish more academically throughout the school day, recess time has recently been reduced or removed completely in many schools. Outdoor free play has many benefits for children, including physical benefits through the increase of physical activity, and social-emotional benefits through interactions with peers. In addition, Brez and Sheets (2017), describe the benefits for cognitive and academic development as recess allows a break from the classroom. These breaks from the classroom can also help increase student attention and decrease problem behaviors. Brez and Sheets (2017) completed a study examining the benefits of outdoor recess on third, fourth, and fifth grade students. Although the study did not show a significant increase in creativity following the outdoor free play, it did determine positive impacts on students' attention, behavior, and academic performance. Following outdoor peer interactive play, students were more on task and participated more in the classroom, had fewer behavioral outbursts, and achieved more academically.

Ouvry (2003) suggests that outdoor play encourages children to move and be active. In addition, she describes six reasons why children should play outdoors every day. These reasons include to gain information about the world, allow a context for role play, foster a chance to express emotions, and to promote activity and development. Ouvry (2003) also suggests that when children are not provided with adequate outdoor space, they may exhibit more challenging behaviors and display uncooperative traits. There are many advantages of an increase in outdoor play and this outdoor play is important to include in the early childhood setting.

As Rymanowicz (2015) explored the role of adults, she found that adults have very critical roles in young children's play. These roles include planning for play, supporting play, and reviewing play. As adults plan for play, it is crucial that the environment is designed to help children grow and encourage social interactions. Students should also have the freedom to make choices to lead their learning and play. This freedom of choice is very empowering for young children and can give them the voice to guide their individual interests. The second role that adults have is to support play. This role can include validating children's efforts during play, adding to the play, building children up during play, or preventing problems during play. As adults work to prevent problems, it is important to remember to allow for opportunities for children to practice problem solving independently. The final role that adults have is to review the play. This involves reflecting on the play and considering changes that can be made to enhance the environment or play opportunities for children. By supporting children during play, adults provide children with opportunities to engage in exploration, gain confidence, and improve social emotional skills (Rymanowicz, 2015). In addition, Ouvry suggests that planned play can help foster varying purposes for children. "Well-planned play, both indoors and outdoors, is a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge. In playing,

they behave in different ways: sometimes their play will be boisterous, sometimes they will describe and discuss what they are doing, sometimes they will be quiet and reflective as they play.” (Ouvry, 2003) It is important to consider an individual’s Zone of Proximal Development when analyzing autonomy within play. The Zone of Proximal Development was developed by Lev Vygotsky and is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). When considering play, the adult’s job is to scaffold and provide support at the point in which the child cannot master the skill or task independently. For these barrier moments, the adult will assist the child to allow them the opportunity to achieve the task and be successful. When considering social skills instruction and the Zone of Proximal Development, it is important to allow students the opportunity to practice and engage with a peer or other individual to allow them the opportunity to master a skill in which they would not be able to alone.

Although many agree that play is a crucial component of early learning, some argue that play is a waste of instructional time in the educational setting. Many schools are struggling with the ‘earlier-is-better’ syndrome, which changes the views of early childhood education. As Pica (2006) stated, “Today, the curriculum once considered appropriate for first and second graders is being taught to children in kindergarten, and the kindergarten curriculum is foisted on children who are not yet five years old” (p. 2). This is resulting in less play in the kindergarten setting, as more pressure to follow academic curriculum and produce measurable testing results is put on educators (Pica, 2006). As research has been conducted to determine the effects of play in early childhood education, Pica proceeded to explain that there is “a strong correlation between the

time children are most playful and the time when the brain is making the most connections” (Pica, 2006, p. 2). Knowing the benefits of play and the fact that many children are entering kindergarten without the social-emotional skills they need to be successful, it is evident that the inclusion of more play in the kindergarten setting may be necessary.

In addition to the importance of play, social skills instruction is another key component in developing social emotional skills in early learning settings. As defined by Psychology Dictionary, social skills “are the skills that allow a person to interact and to act appropriately in given social contexts. The skills include assertiveness, coping, communication and friendship making skills” (Nungent, 2013). These skills are important for peer interactions, understanding appropriate ways to act in different settings, and strengthening an individual’s growth mindset. In the early childhood setting, it is important to look at developmentally appropriate social emotional skills and explicitly teach positive interactions to strengthen these skills.

As Jones (2010) describes, there are various social skills benchmarks that children reach as they grow cognitively. When describing social skills in primary grades, Jones (2010) stated, The development of social competence, self-competence, and self-concept begin in infancy and continue throughout one’s lifetime, constantly undergoing modification in response to interpersonal interactions and life experiences. The social skills of preschoolers are immature, but by five years of age, children are able to cooperate, share, and take turns; use social problem-solving; and display sensitivity to social problems and social consequences. It is through play that these social interactions and skills are practiced. Preschool emotional skills include developing trust and autonomy, maintaining self-control, facing reality, and exhibiting empathy and sympathy (p. 338).

When teaching social skills instruction, it is important to consider these milestones for children and provide additional interventions for students lacking these benchmark skills for their age group.

As Jones (2010) describes, delays in social and emotional development is common among children with mild disabilities. These social skills are dependent on adequate cognitive skills and many of these children have difficulties in various social situations, including reading others' facial expressions or body language, and disinhibition, which is the ability to keep thoughts in your head without saying them aloud. In addition, many students with mild disabilities have delays in language acquisition, which can also correlate with social difficulties. These children often have deficits with non-linguistic and linguistic language skills making it challenging to mature emotionally and socially. Many children with these language deficits and mild disabilities often function on a literal level and often struggle to understand the complex thinking involved in various social situations. These deficits make it challenging for individuals to understand conversations including sarcasm, humor, figurative language, flirting, or teasing (Jones, 2010).

With many children entering kindergarten without the social skills needed to be successful, questions arise about the effectiveness of our current school system and how educators are working to meet children's social needs. As Cooper and Cefai (2009) state:

Questions have been raised about the value and effectiveness of an educational system that had become out of tune with the realities and challenges of the 21st century. Young people were leaving school without the adequate competencies necessary to function as successful and resilient citizens. As Nel Noddings (1992) put it: 'the traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary

society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools' (p. 173).

Explicit social skills instruction is a crucial component in the early childhood setting as children learn how to interact with one another. When administering social skills instruction, this intervention time should include an explicit lesson component, as well as the inclusion of an opportunity to play and practice the skills that has been taught. This is a key component for children, especially students with mild to moderate disabilities, to hear the expectation, see it modeled, and then have time allotted to practice on their own or with their peers. These skills should then be reinforced and reiterated throughout the school day to help students appropriately interact and engage in positive social interactions. In addition, children should be provided with various tools and strategies to help them manage emotions and self-regulate. These tools and strategies should be modeled and frequently practiced throughout the day.

For this action research, both of these components, play and explicit social skills instruction, will be integrated together to provide young learners with more opportunities to communicate with others, improve social emotional skills, and grow cognitively. The daily schedule will also be adjusted from the general education setting to meet the unique needs of these learners. This will allow for additional play, explicit social skills instruction, rest time, and brain breaks/movement breaks provided throughout the school day. After implementing these changes, the team will review behavioral and academic data to determine the effects of this change.

Methods

Johnson STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) Academy is a public elementary school in the Cedar Rapids Community School District serving primarily low-income students in a high poverty area. During the 2018-2019 school year, Johnson served three sections of kindergarten classes with a total of 69 kindergarteners. The majority of these kindergarteners did not previously attend preschool or any form of pre-kindergarten educational setting. For these students, kindergarten at Johnson at age five was the first opportunity they had to interact with other same-aged peers in the structure of a school setting.

In addition to the high number of students that did not attend preschool, 19 kindergarteners that attended Johnson during the 2018-2019 school year had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Nine kindergarteners had behavior IEP goals, five had adaptive behavior goals, four had reading goals, four had math goals, and thirteen had speech goals. Two students came from a Behavior Focused Preschool setting and had one-on-one paraprofessional services written into their Individualized Education Plans. In addition to these students with IEPs, there were many general education students that did not attend any form of pre-kindergarten education and came with significant mental health issues, trauma backgrounds, and intensive behaviors.

During the academic 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, Johnson STEAM Academy's special education program operated through a primarily push-in model. This allowed special education students to receive specially designed instruction in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with their same-aged, general education peers. Johnson found success with this model during these two academic school years but struggled to sustain this model with the high need kindergarteners that started during the 2018-2019 school year. The team found that

with the high need students in the 2018-2019 school year, many of the students were not making adequate progress socially, behaviorally, and academically in the general education classroom setting.

In November of 2018, the Learning Support Team (LST) and kindergarten general education teachers at Johnson Elementary School came together to develop an alternative plan to support students with IEPs in kindergarten who were not finding success with the current model. The team proposed an alternative location and schedule for these students which would allow increased play and explicit social skills instruction directed at their individual needs. With this model, student participants would receive the majority of instruction in the special education setting but would be integrated for recess, lunch, and specials. This would allow students to receive instruction in a smaller group setting, with a lower student to teacher ratio, differentiated instruction to meet students' individual needs for learning, and extensive reteaching to achieve mastery of skills.

Participants

Johnson STEAM Academy's Learning Supports Team (LST), which consisted of K-2 general education teachers, special education teachers, the school's Instructional Design Strategist, school principal, AEA school psychologists, and school counselor, identified three students needing a significant increase in opportunities for play and explicit social skills instruction integrated throughout the school day. These three students would receive instruction in the special education classroom for the full day, while integrating with their same aged peers for lunch, recess, and specials. In addition to these three identified students, the team also identified four other students that would need this model on occasion, through an as needed basis.

The three students identified for the full-time model were all kindergarten students with a range in needs. Student A and Student B had been identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Student C has Downs Syndrome with limited communication skills, requiring the use of an augmentative CORE communication board. In addition to these three full-time students, four additional students would participate during various times of the school day. These included two additional kindergarten students with behavior IEPs, one first grade student with a behavior IEP, and a second grade student with Autism Spectrum Disorder and behavior, reading, writing, math, and speech Individualized Education Plan goals.

Prior to the implementation of the new model, Student A had been averaging 35 incidents of disruption and 18 acts of physical aggression per day. These disruptions included screaming, throwing items, laying on the floor, swearing, and leaving the expected location. The incidents of physical aggression included acts toward himself, peers, and teachers. These included banging his head on the desk or wall, throwing items at others, head-butting others, hitting, spitting, kicking, biting, and punching others. Prior to the new model, Student A had a one-on-one paraprofessional that assisted him throughout the whole school day in the general education classroom.

Student B had been averaging 14 incidents of elopement, 17 acts of refusal per day, and 13 incidents of disruption per day prior to the implementation of the new model. While the team was not tracking physical aggression during this time period, Student B also had occasional incidents of physical aggression including hitting, kicking, and destroying property. This destruction of property included throwing chairs, knocking desks over, and ripping classroom materials. When looking at academics, Student B was averaging five correct letter sounds per

minute, which is below the fifth percentile when compared to kindergarteners in the winter. Math was considered an area of strength for this student and prior to the implementation of the model, Student B was able to correctly count to 29 independently. Same aged peers are expected to count to 60 independently at that point of their kindergarten school year. During the beginning implementation of this new model, the team was in the middle of a re-evaluation period for Student B to create a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and add both a behavior goal and an adaptive behavior goal to his Individualized Education Plan.

Student C was averaging six incidents of physical aggression per day prior of the new model implementation. This physical aggression included hitting or kicking staff and peers. Same aged peers are expected to engage in 1 or fewer incidents of physical aggression per day. In the area of math, Student C was able to independently count to three. Same aged peers are expected to be able to correctly count to 60 independently at this point in the kindergarten school year. Prior to the implementation of the new model, in the area of reading, Student C could correctly identify the first two letters of her name and was unable to correctly identify any letter sounds when shown a visual letter. According to the state designated reading norms, this was below the fifth percentile when compared to kindergarteners in the winter.

Data Collection

The new special education model began in February of 2019 and continued for the remainder of the 2018-2019 school year. For this action research, data was collected for six academic weeks between February and April. During this timeframe, data was collected toward individual student's IEP goals, FAST progress monitoring, and student referral data. The behavioral goals for these students monitored physical aggression, elopement, disruption, and

non-compliance. In addition to the behavioral monitoring, students were also monitored on academic progress in the areas of reading, writing, and math.

Appendix A and Appendix B show the variance in schedules between the general education kindergarten classroom and the new model's special education kindergarten classroom. In the general education setting, kindergarteners have approximately 50 minutes of play per day. In the special education classroom, kindergarteners have approximately 115 minutes of play per day. In the general education kindergarten classroom, students receive approximately ten minutes of explicit social skills instruction per day. Kindergarteners in the special education classroom receive approximately 45 minutes of explicit social skills instruction per day.

When looking at the social skills instruction that was provided to these students in the special education setting, a variety of focus topics were covered including self-regulation strategies, appropriate play and peer interactions, and following the group plan. The curriculum utilized included We Thinkers, LEAP Curriculum, and ZONES of Regulation. The We Thinkers curriculum, developed by Ryan Hendrix, Kari Zweber Palmer, Nancy Tarshis, and Michelle Garcia Winner, utilizes play to teach evidence-based social skills concepts with a focus on thoughts and feelings, thinking with your eyes, following the group plan, keeping body in the group, and whole body listening. (Hendrix, Palmer, Tarshis, Winner, 2013) The LEAP Project, which Philip Strain explored in *Nurturing Social Skills in the Inclusive Classroom*, was also incorporated throughout the new model as explicit social skills instruction and social skills instruction integrated through play. This curriculum focuses on early childhood social interactions, such as getting a friend's attention, sharing a toy, and giving a compliment to a friend. A big component of LEAP is ensuring that instruction is provided, for example, how to

appropriately share a toy, and then students will role play and practice the skill immediately following the instruction. The ZONES of Regulation curriculum was created by Leah M. Kuypers focuses on helping students to be aware of their emotions and providing strategies to manage these emotions or outbursts. For this instruction, focus was on identifying emotions and regulating behavior. A large board was created in the special education classroom with Velcro pictures of all students and staff, allowing each individual to move their picture to the color-coded feeling that he or she identified with most at the time. There were then strategies associated with each colored feeling to help regulate behavior and emotions.

In addition to this explicit social skills instruction and instruction embedded through play, students were also receiving additional sensory breaks throughout the school day in the special education classroom. These breaks included the use of body socks, trampoline time, kinetic sand, medicine balls, Theraputty, heavy lifting and pulling, and mindfulness activities. In addition, the district's occupational therapist supported in the classroom to provide additional activities for students to complete to meet their movement needs. These suggestions included having students work while laying on their stomachs, using weighted blankets, as well as wheelbarrow and crab walking to meet their body's need for grounding. In addition, elopement was a big issue for one of the participants of this study. A "safe spot" was provided to this student, and instruction was delivered to teach the replacement behavior of running to this spot, rather than outside of the room or building. All of these accommodations were incorporated into the school day in the special education classroom.

Findings

Data Analysis

For this action research, academic and behavioral data was reviewed prior to the new model implementation, as well as after the first six weeks of the new model. Each student was tracking different target areas, based on the goals written in their Individualized Education Plan. The table below shows each student's behavioral and academic baselines and the progress that each child made after six weeks of the special education model with increased play and social skills instruction.

Table 1

Special Education Model Behavioral and Academic Data

Participant	Baseline Prior to New Model Implementation	First Six Weeks of New Model	Improvement over Implementation Period
Student A	Disruption: 35 per day	Disruption: 18 per day	17 improvement
	Physical Aggression: 18 per day	Physical Aggression: 9 per day	9 improvement
Student B	Elopement: 14 per day	Elopement: 4 per day	10 improvement
	Refusal: 17 per day	Refusal: 9 per day	8 improvement
	Disruption: 13 per day	Disruption: 12 per day	1 improvement
	Reading: 5 correct letter sounds per minute	Reading: 7 correct letter sounds per minute	2 improvement
	Math: Count to 29 independently	Math: Count to 59 independently	30 improvement

Student C	Physical Aggression: 6 per day	Physical Aggression: 4 per day	2 improvement
	Math: Count to 3 independently	Math: Count to 3 independently	0 improvement
	Reading: 2 correct letter names	Reading: 3 correct letter names	1 improvement
	0 correct letter sounds	1 correct letter sound	1 improvement

When looking at Student A, it is clear that the new model had a positive impact on his behaviors. Student A is a very active child and, when given more opportunities to play and be active, we saw a decrease in his incidents of disruption and physical aggression. At the beginning of the new model, the winter weather had made it challenging for students to get outside for recess and playtime. In correlation with this limitation on outside time, the team saw an increase in behaviors as Student A was not provided with outside movement breaks. After the weather warmed up and he was able to go outside consistently for recess, we saw another significant decrease in his behaviors. Student A had a baseline of 35 disruptions per day and reduced this to 18 per day, six weeks in to the new model. In addition, prior to the new model he was averaging 18 incidents of physical aggression per day and reduced this to 9 per day at the end of the study. The team was very pleased with Student A's progress throughout this implementation period and feel that this program, with more play and more social skills instruction, is an appropriate fit for him.

For Student B, data shows that the new model was successful in reducing incidents of refusal, disruption, and elopement. Student B reduced his incidents of elopement from 14 per day to 4 per day. After providing explicit social skills instruction with a focus on following the group plan and keeping his body in the group, as well as providing an alternative "safe spot"

location, incidents of elopement decreased drastically. Student B also reduced incidents of refusal from 17 per day to 9 per day. Although Student B had a significant decrease in behaviors after the implementation of the new model, there was not a significant improvement with his academic abilities during this timeframe. In the area of reading, Student B had an increase of two correct letter sounds during the six-week implementation period, going from five correct letter sounds per minute to seven correct letter sounds per minute. Although this was an increase, the expected growth rate for children at this point in the kindergarten year was higher than Student B achieved. In the area of math, in February, Student B was able to correctly count to 29 independently and after the six-week period increased this to 59. Overall, the team felt that this program was successful for Student B when looking at behavior but still feel as if additional supports need to be put into place to help him academically.

When reviewing the data for Student C, the team recorded the decrease in physical aggression incidents during the school day. Prior to the new model, Student C was averaging 6 incidents of physical aggression per day and after the six-week period, was averaging 4 incidents of physical aggression per day. With Student C's CORE board utilized with more fidelity in the small group setting of the new model, the team observed fewer behaviors due to her ability to better communicate with peers and staff. In addition, the team noticed that Student C had a more positive attitude during the school day and observed an increase in participation, which the team felt was associated with the small group setting with less distractions. When looking at Student C's academic progress during the timeframe of the action research, the team did not observe a significant increase in academic abilities. Student C did not make progress in the area of oral counting for math but when given letter visuals, did improve by one correct letter name and one correct letter sound during the six-weeks. The team feels that the small group setting, explicit

social skills instruction, and increased play is beneficial for Student C but, similar to Student B, feel that additional academic supports need to be put into place.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

Data collection over the course of the six weeks of implementation with the new special education model has shown that increased play and increased social skills instruction has a positive impact on students' behaviors. The students within this study all reduced their average incidents of physical aggression, refusal, disruption, and elopement per day. Overall, physical aggression was reduced by 46%, refusal was reduced by 47%, disruption was reduced by 38%, and elopement was reduced by 71%. Through observations, the team also noticed that the students involved seemed happier throughout the school day, participated more, and formed strong friendships amongst the students in the program. In addition, after numerous parent conversations, parents were pleased with the reduction of behaviors that they've seen at home after the start of the new model.

Although there was academic growth made for all students during the implementation of this model, the amount of academic growth for Student B and Student C was still minimal. During the timeframe of this action research study, Student B increased his correct letter sounds per minute by two correct sounds. Student C gained one correct letter sound and one correct letter name during this six-week period. This minimal growth informs the team that additional academic interventions need to be put into place to support these students in the areas of reading and math. For this study, academics were not the primary focus, as the team felt that the social-emotional skills that were lacking amongst the participants was the main priority. For the

remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, additional academic supports will be put into place to help these students with their academic delays.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was the challenge with consistency of schedules during the implementation of the new model, due to frequent winter weather delays and cancellations. During the implementation period, Johnson STEAM Academy had eight school cancellations, four two-hour delays, and two two-hour early dismissals. As the implementation of the new model was new for students involved, these delays and cancellations made it very challenging to get into a routine and have consistency with the program. This lack of consistency with school days during the early phase of our new program affected the students involved and the team saw higher numbers of behaviors during this time period. As soon as there was more consistency of routine and schedule during the day, along with the increased social skills instruction and play throughout the day, the team began to see these behaviors decrease.

In addition to the weather-related delays and cancellations, there were also attendance issues with two of the students involved in the program. During the six-week implementation period, Student B missed seven days of school and Student C missed six days of school. For the kindergarten school year, Student C had missed over 23 days of school. Knowing that this was a challenge and after speaking to her mother about her limitations with getting her daughter to school on time, the IEP team determined that Specialized Transportations Services with door-to-door bussing should be included in her IEP services. After this amendment was made, Student C's attendance had improved significantly, and she had only missed one more day during the implementation period.

Further Study

At Johnson STEAM Academy, many students enter kindergarten without any prior prekindergarten education. In addition, many of the students at Johnson STEAM Academy come from high poverty and trauma backgrounds. Knowing this about the clientele, the team has considered how to support these incoming kindergarten students who may be lacking important social-emotional skills necessary for the success in a formal education setting. The Learning Supports team at Johnson has proposed the inclusion of more play and explicit social skills instruction into the general education kindergarten classes to allow more time for interventions to strengthen students' social skills. This proposal would also include a co-teaching model with a special education teacher to ensure that differentiated, explicit social skills instruction is provided with fidelity to meet students' individual needs for learning. If implemented, data will continue to be collected to determine the effects of this change in kindergarten general education.

Conclusion

Play is an essential component of childhood development and should be included in early childhood educational settings. Some of the benefits of play include strengthening executive functioning skills, enhancing brain development, improving communication skills, encouraging the use of imagination, strengthening motor skills, and developing problem solving strategies. Play can help foster many of the skills needed to be successful in the elementary education setting. In addition, outdoor play offers many benefits including increased physical activity, social-emotional benefits, and cognitive benefits. Providing children with additional opportunities to play in the kindergarten setting can have a positive impact on student behaviors in the classroom setting.

In addition to play, social skills instruction is an important component in kindergarten settings. As children begin to navigate new social situations and learn social norms within the formal school setting, it is important to provide them with explicit instruction on appropriate peer and school interactions. This instruction with a focus on social skills helps students learn to manage and regulate emotions, interact appropriately with peers, and follow the group plan within the school setting. When looking at intensive behaviors such as physical aggression, social skills instruction can help foster replacement skills by helping children to recognize their behaviors. It is crucial that this instruction is provided explicitly to students and allows adequate time for practice with peers.

The action research conducted through this study has shown that an increase in time allotted for play and social skills instruction has had a positive impact on student behavior for this particular group of kindergarteners in a special education classroom. As additional time was provided for instruction regarding appropriate behaviors in the school setting, the team saw a significant decrease in all three participants' behavioral outbursts. In addition, the team observed the students to appear happier, have stronger friendships within the school setting, and participate more throughout the school day. Parent conversations also indicated that parents saw more positive behaviors from their children at home. As educators continue to amend curriculum and change instruction, it is important to continue to allow opportunities for play and ensure that social skills are being explicitly taught.

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Appendix A

General Education Kindergarten Classroom Schedule	
8:10-8:50	Breakfast in cafeteria
8:50-9:10	Morning Tubs
9:10-10:15	Reading Block
10:15-10:30	Recess
10:30-11:05	Writing
11:05-11:40	Lunch/Recess
11:40-12:10	Learning Videos
12:10-12:50	Specials (Art, Music, PE)
12:50-1:10	Playtime
1:15-2:00	ST Math (math program on ipads)
2:00-3:00	Math Block
3:00-3:35	Science/Social Studies
3:40-3:50	Pack up/Dismissal

Appendix B

Special Education Kindergarten Classroom Schedule	
8:10-8:30	Breakfast in cafeteria – when students finish eating, paraprofessionals will escort to special education room for morning playtime
8:30-9:00	Playtime Social Skills incorporated into playtime – adults ensuring appropriate interactions
9:00-9:10	Community Circle/Morning Social Skills
9:10-10:10	Reading and Writing block
10:10-10:15	LEAP curriculum social skills instruction – frontloading for recess play
10:15-10:35	Kindergarten Recess – Appropriate play facilitated by paraprofessionals
10:35-11:05	Science/Social Studies
11:05-11:40	Lunch/Recess Paraprofessionals present to guide appropriate social interactions
11:40-12:10	Mindfulness Activity Quiet Play/Rest Time
12:10-12:50	Specials (Art, Music, PE)
12:50-1:05	Movement Break/Playtime
1:05-1:35	Social Skills Instruction followed by play/activity practicing specific skill
1:35-2:50	ST Math/Math Block
2:50-3:40	Playtime
3:40-3:50	Pack up/Dismissal