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Play-Based Early Childhood Curriculum and Early Literacy Success Link

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Play-Based Early Childhood Curriculum and Early Literacy Success Link

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A Literature Review Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education

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Abstract

This literature review synthesizes research on how play-based learning and early-literacy success are linked. The review shows changes in early childhood education in the 20th Century and how play-based curriculums have affected children's early literacy success. This literature review cites past studies carried out by influential early childhood theorists. Publish research on this topic reveals strong evidence that children's literacy is developed through play, particularly when guided and teacher-directed play experiences connect to early literacy in a positive manner.

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Play-Based Early Childhood Curriculum and Early Literacy Success Link

In 2002, as a result of declining proficiency, the U.S. government put into place No Child Left Behind legislation with an emphasis on student achievement (Wexler, 2018). This has put pressure on all educators including preschool teachers. Because of the increased pressure on academic achievement, assessment and accountability, play-based early childhood curriculums began disappearing at an alarming rate (Nicolopoulou, 2010). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was passed, which eased the consequences but did little to ease the testing requirements (Wexler, 2018). The latest research indicates that during a school day, children spend four to six times more minutes in reading and math teacher-directed instruction than in play-based learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). However, some research suggests play and literacy learning in preschools are not mutually exclusive activities (Miller & Almon, 2009). This literature review synthesizes published research on both topics and seeks to answer this question: Does a play-based early childhood curriculum have an impact on success of early childhood literacy?

Literature Review

Play and emergent literacy skills are developmentally important characteristics of early childhood education, and there is an abundant amount of literature published about them. Understanding the definition of play and emergent literacy skills is crucial in understanding their possible connection. Emergent literacy skills in preschool help prepare the students to read, write and be successful long term in school (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Play is important to early childhood development and affects children cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally (Ginsburg, 2007). Unfortunately, early childhood teachers are under increasing pressure to have

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all preschoolers know their letters, letter sounds, rhyming, and other phonemic awareness skills before the children enter kindergarten (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). In many schools this may mean a significant reduction in the amount of time dedicated to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Research suggest literacy and play are not mutually exclusive, but rather linked.

Emergent Literacy Skills

Emergent literacy skills are reading and writing behaviors that precede conventional literacy (Cabell, 2011). Emergent literacy skills also include oral language, phonological awareness, letter recognition, vocabulary skills, and print concepts. In early childhood, language and literacy are developed through peer and adult social interactions (Puteh & Ali, 2013).

Preschool students come to class at different levels and are being taught many components of emergent literacy. These components will eventually lead to reading (Fischel, et al, 2007). When students come into preschool at different levels, teachers have to work hard to get every child to proficient by the end of the school year.

Socioeconomic status one difference in school readiness in the U.S. Poor students tend to start school at a disadvantage in emergent literacy skills (Isaacs, 2012). At the age of five, only 48% of poor preschoolers are prepared for school, compared to 75% of children coming from moderate to high socioeconomic homes (Isaacs, 2012). That is a 27-percentage point gap that is hard to close.

The relationship between a child's emergent literacy skills when they enter preschool and their success in academics throughout school are highly correlated (Fischel, Bracken, Fuchs-Eisenberg, Spira, Katz, & Shaller, 2007). According to Wyer and Casares, (2019, p.1)

“Students that are found to be non-proficient in reading by the end of the third grade are 4 times

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more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. In fact, 88 percent of students who failed to earn a high school diploma were struggling readers in third grade.”

Changes in Early Childhood

Across the American educational system play is being displaced and in its place the focus has shifted to teaching academic skills through direct instruction (Wright, 2016). This approach isn't only affecting children in upper elementary grades but preschool and lower elementary as well (Nicolopoulou, 2010). This approach comes at the expense of child-centered, play-based and constructivist approaches (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Educators often feel the need to validate the play-based curriculum to administrators, parents and co-workers as a real act of teaching and learning (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Many parents, administrators and even some teachers believe play doesn't belong in the classroom. There is a growing use of paper and pencil work in the early childhood classroom for emergent literacy skills and other skills such as mathematics (Excell & Linington, 2011). Preschools are introducing academic work earlier because of state and federal education reforms, parents are pushing more on their children before they are developmentally ready and administrators are focused on the curricular program and less play time (Gurirguis, 2018).

Play was once a large part of early childhood education in public and private schools in the United States, however play in school has all but vanished (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Policies with good intentions have been put into place by the government, such as No Child Left Behind and Reading First. These laws changed the early childhood educational experience (Miller & Almon, 2009). There has become an increased emphasis on student achievement through assessments and testing (Kane, 2016). There is a push from administrators and government to raise academic achievement in schools and states, which is placing less

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importance on play-based curriculum and more importance on direct instruction. The school day and school year have grown longer, recess times shorter, and children are now going to early childhood education centers that are more academically focused (McGinn, 2017). It is very clear that play is being replaced by core academic studies and activities (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). Miller and Almon (2009) found there are three main reasons for the loss of play in early childhood classrooms: academic standardized curriculum, lack of time to incorporate play, and administrators who don't value play in the classroom.

However, there may even be disagreement among early childhood teachers on the value of play-based learning. In a study conducted by Lynch (2015) using netnography, the researcher studied publicly-available message boards where teachers had posted conversations about play in early childhood. In coding common themes from the conversations, she found that teachers had mixed opinions on the academic value of play, and many questioned how to make play-based activities more academic. The teachers labeled activities with an academic tone rather than a playful name; instead of play center, developmental center. The teachers disclosed this was often due to fear of being judged by other elementary teachers as having an easy job, or being reprimanded by principals for not focusing enough on direct instruction. Teachers also shared that the pressure of standardized assessments and mandated curricula required they eliminate any activity that may not be direct instruction. However, most teachers had an easier time defending the value of play for children's social development. Lynch suggested that because preschoolers have motivation and need for play, taking that away will lead to a decrease in social engagement and competencies (Lynch, 2015)

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Play-Based Learning Theory

There have been many researchers who have studied the link between play and early literacy, including well-known education theorists Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Montessori believed the setup of the environment was key for children to develop emergent literacy skills unknowingly (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). Montessori schools were constructed with the preschool student in mind; rooms were equipped with child-sized furniture and everything was within reach of the student. This allowed preschoolers to become self-constructivist learners (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). A self-constructivist learner learns through doing and repetition (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). Montessori also believed that children should be given large amounts of free time for play (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). Montessori schools allow children to develop at their own pace. These schools look like miniature workshops which encourage hands-on learning. The materials used enhance independence and lead to the understanding of complex vocabulary (Meinke, 2019).

Piaget suggested the way children experience and interact with their surroundings is how they understand the way their environment works (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). Play from Piaget's perspective is a natural way for children to express ideas (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). Piaget believed that early childhood learning and development are a balance of two processes, the first being assimilation where children incorporate new ideas and information into existing cognitive structures and the second of accommodation, in which a child will modify the existing cognitive structure to match or be like something in the reality of the physical world (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Piaget suggested that play is not just fun for children, play can and should be used as a tool for developing emergent literacy (Rajapaaksha, 2016). Piaget also supported the

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idea that language development in early childhood is related to cognitive development (Ali, Aziz, Majzub, 2011).

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory supports the understanding of language and emergent literacy through the activity of play (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory notes that through pretend play preschool-aged children enter a transitional stage where thoughts are separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than things (Roskos & Christie, 2013). The activity of pretend play is a transformation of the thought process in the child, and this is a pivot between thought and object (Roskos & Christie, 2013). "Pretend play, therefore is a leading activity that in and of itself creates a zone of proximal development that creates developmental change. If we accept this argument, pretend play, then, is instrumental in literacy development because it directly advances the mental processes essential for learning to read and write" (Roskos & Christie, 2013 p. 83). Vygotsky described the Zone of Proximal Development as the space between what a child already knows, or where the child is developmentally and the next level of development, which is attainable through adult or peer scaffolding (Roskos and Christie, 2011).

Emergent literacy skills are a part of cognitive skill development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that when young children investigate, discover and interact through play they are developing and enhancing cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky thought that children could understand the world through play and adults could advance this development through scaffolding. Scaffolding is a process where an adult or peer assists the child to engage in an activity at a higher level than they would be able to without help. When the child is able to perform the task or activity on their own the adult or peer slowly pulls away until the student is doing it independently (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010). Vygotsky believed that young children can scaffold for themselves through play. Pretend play allows for the change in

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representation skills by creating a new context in which words represent objects. This makes the action less important than the new ideas. The new language skill can help children understand that words represent experiences and opportunities (Roskos and Christie, 2011)

Research on play and early literacy in the preschool setting are less prominent today (McDaniels, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2016). Recent play-based curriculum and literacy studies are lacking and educators and others continue to rely on the research of Piaget and Vygotsky, even though so much has changed (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

Play-Based Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum is one that is frequently used in early childhood and supports learning for the whole child through opportunities and experiences (Griswold, 2018). The Creative Curriculum puts play into four categories (Colker & Heroman, 2009). These categories of play are functional play, constructive play, dramatic or pretend play, and games with rules. Functional play is also considered practice play. Constructive play is when children use their hands to create or assemble an object. Pretend play is the repeating of roles that children observe. Games with rules would be playing hide and seek, tag or even a board game. Creative Curriculum has a key role for teachers and adults in the classroom. Teachers use Creative Curriculum to observe students in the preschool environment, guide student learning opportunities, and finally assess children's success (Colker & Heroman, 2009). The teacher can facilitate play and make adaptations or modifications as needed.

Play in Early Childhood

Play is a behavior that is not fully functional it is a choice activity, relaxed and repetitive (Roskos & Christie 2013). Play is considered to be rewarding, pleasurable, and reinforcing to the person who is performing the act (Guirguis, 2018). Play or the behavior of play can be

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unfinished, acted out, and involve patterns (Roskos & Christie 2013). Play should be motivating for the child and should provide satisfaction from the activity (Irvin, 2017). Play can happen with familiar objects, new unfamiliar objects, or no objects at all, (Irvin, 2017). The goal of play is made up by the child and the behavior is spontaneous.

Play benefits childhood development by encouraging children to use creativity, imagination, dexterity, physical, cognitive, and emotional strength (Ginsburg, 2007). Preschoolers learn to explore their world, work through problems, self-regulate, decision make and self-advocate (Ginsburg, 2007). A preschooler needs play that addresses the whole child including physical, social, and emotional development (Miller & Almon, 2009). Preschoolers should have both free play and playful learning to address all of their needs in the preschool setting (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Play is a natural form for preschoolers to learn and develop. As they talk to, play with, and interact with peers and adults in a play environment, they are naturally stimulated to use language and cognitive skills (Roskos & Christie, 2013). Much is learned through play social emotional skills, academic skills, cognitive skills, and language and literacy skills as play is a child's way of practicing all of the skills that are being taught. Many early childhood educators believe children have a natural instinct to play and engage in fun. Play experiences help preschoolers understand the environment they are part of and if play is a natural instinct for preschool children using play to learn should be an automatic approach (Puteh & Ali, 2013).

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Play-Based Learning & Literacy Linked Research

Research has resulted in evidence that play and emergent literacy skills are connected. In a study carried out by Christakis, Zimmerman, & Garrison, (2007) blocks were given to children along with suggestions for how to play with them. The intervention was looking to encourage playful language and interactions with the child and the caregiver. The blocks were then sent home to families in the intervention group. A control group of the same demographic of children didn't receive blocks or instructions and carried on with their normal routines. There was a growth of vocabulary in the intervention group as expected and little to none in the control group. Researchers theorized the increase in play increased the child engagement which explained the link to language growth (Christakis, Zimmerman, & Garrison, 2007).

In a study conducted at a Head Start program, students were taught new vocabulary words over the course of reading a new book. The children were then allowed to play with two peers for ten minutes using objects that were vocabulary words in the story. There were three types of play that the preschoolers could engage in: free play, directed play, or guided play. In free play children could do whatever they wanted with the objects. In directed play children reenacted the book with an adult. In this option children could play a little with the object but had little opportunity for free expression of preferences. The last choice was guided play where the students could play how they wanted, just like in free play with one exception - the teacher was there asking questions intended to support the vocabulary and emphasize those new words. Preliminary findings suggested the children learned the vocabulary better during guided play and directed play: the adult-supported play improved children's learning literacy skills.

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Morrow (1990) discovered that preschool-aged children improved their literacy skills during play in his research on thematic centers. The study involved thirteen preschool centers that were randomly distributed into one control group and three experimental groups whose play centers were redesigned. The first experimental group include a teacher-guided introduction of story books and other writing utensils placed in the dramatic play center. This center was designed to be a kitchen. The second experimental group included teacher-guided thematic play with story books and writing utensils. This play area was designed to look like a veterinary clinic. Experimental group three included thematic play with books and writing utensils incorporated into a center designed to look like a veterinary clinic, this third center was not teacher-guided. All three of the play centers had the same reading and writing items in addition to materials commonly found in the setting.

Observation data of literacy behaviors during play was collected before the intervention began, shortly after the intervention began and a month after the intervention. Morrow found that the redesign and interaction of play centers had an impact on the preschoolers' types and quantity of literacy play. The data showed that the thematic play setting used in the experimental groups produced the most emergent literacy engagement. Group one showed the most writing behaviors and group three showed the most reading engagement.

In a 2011 study, McDaniels, analyzed how preschool children demonstrated emergent literacy skills in self-initiated play and how teachers and setting can influence literacy skills within play. The researcher spent five weeks in a low to middle socioeconomic preschool classroom. There were four girls and seven boys in the classroom along with a lead teacher and assistant teacher. McDaniels collected data through observation, journaling and teacher interviews. McDaniels visited the classroom a total of nine times over the five weeks of her

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study. What she observed was children allowed to free play in a setting with a variety of early literacy tools. She noted that emergent literacy skills were demonstrated during play such as pretend reading, sounding words out, using picture cues, letter/sound recognition, book handling, and making connections (McDaniels, 2011). In this study McDaniels observed the teacher actively supporting preschooler's literacy skills during play. She noted that new materials were placed in the centers, the teacher encouraged students to try out the materials and the teacher modeled how to use the new objects (McDaniels, 2011).

A study done by Nicolopoulou (2015) examined how storytelling play and story acting play fostered children's learning of emergent literacy skills. Three dimensions of emergent literacy skills were studied: narrative and oral language skills, emergent literacy skills and social competence. Six low-income, diverse ethnic background preschools participated in the study. All of the classrooms were full-time, full-year preschool education centers. This study was carried out for two years. Teaching Strategies Creative Curriculum was the program used in all classrooms. Six classrooms were designated to be Story Telling and Story Acting (STSA) classrooms (the intervention). This activity generally took place at least twice a week during free time in the classroom where the students would work with the teacher to tell any kind of story they wished. The teacher would ask probing questions such as, "What happened next?" Students were also allowed to share their stories and drawings with their class. Children in the intervention group demonstrated improvement in narrative comprehension, emergent literacy skills, print and words awareness, beginning sound awareness, pretend abilities, peer play disruption, self-regulation, and self-comprehension, emergent literacy skills, print and word awareness, beginning sound awareness, pretend abilities, peer play disruption, self-regulation, and self-inhibition. There were no significant changes between the intervention group and the

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control group in the areas, expressive vocabulary, rhyming awareness, peer play interaction, and self-assertion. The experiment overall supported the hypothesis that the storytelling and playacting foster emergent literacy skills as the preschool students in the intervention group showed greater improvements than the preschoolers in the control group (Nicolopoulou, 2015).

Play and language are linked skills for many reasons. Numerous forms of play have symbolic thinking or an object-substitution pretense (Weisberg et al., 2013). The prop serves as a symbol for the real item, for example the banana as a phone. This allows children practice through play with communication and an opportunity to form symbolic relationships (Weisberg et al., 2013).

It is evident from the literature that play intentionally structured with literacy resources and direct engagement by the teacher amplifies the positive effect of play on emergent literacy skills. In a play-based curriculum teacher support is critical to learning and having a successful experience (Ali et al., 2011). Teachers need to model and scaffold literacy skills for students through play-based learning. Teachers have the opportunity to design learning activities and experiences that preschoolers want to be engaged in and this will make their learning early literacy more meaningful (Ali et al., 2011).

Environment for Play-Based Literacy Based Classroom

The early childhood classroom environment plays a critical part in a child's play. Classroom environment is the way in which the classroom is set up with different areas available for the children to play and learn in (McDaniels, 2011). The environment should include a variety of emergent literacy materials in order for children to be successful (McDaniels, 2011).

During play, preschoolers have time to apply new and developing emergent literacy skills in a creative setting (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). That setting should be healthy,

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developmentally appropriate, and well supervised (Griswold, 2018). Teachers can implement different play choices and materials that will engage children and trigger their prior knowledge (Griswold, 2018). A developmentally appropriate preschool should have well-defined areas, centers, literacy objects throughout the classroom and teacher support (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

It is critical that teachers provide environmental print, books and verbal language in their classrooms. Students need to see teachers use written language so they will be able to model that behavior (Jahnke, 2019). Teachers can help support emergent literacy development by practicing it in the everyday routine of preschool. Early childhood play environments can directly affect and contribute to the development of early literacy both through the experience involved with play and the enriched environment (Ali et al., 2011). A literacy and language rich early childhood environment is one where, “children are exposed deliberately and recurrently to high-quality verbal input among peers and adults and in which adult-child verbal interactions are characterized by high levels of adult responsiveness” (Justice, 2004. p.3) Literacy is in everyday living for adults. It is important that an early childhood setting be literacy-enriched as well (Anderson, Spainhower, & Sharp 2014).

Strategies for Play-Based Literacy-Based Learning

Instructional strategies in which early childhood educators choose to teach literacy and language skills is key. Early childhood teachers should use material that is content rich in language instruction (Neuman & Roskos, 2003). Every student should be considered when planning strategies for the classroom: consider things such as time, materials, resources, and group sizes. Teachers should provide opportunities for learning early literacy skills through play (Neuman & Roskos, 2003). When developing early literacy skills in the context of play, teachers should provide opportunities for educational and quality interactions which are spontaneous and

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flexible to help grow literacy behaviors in preschoolers (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009). The early childhood teacher also has the important job to scaffold preschool students in their play-based learning (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

One strategy for early childhood educators is promoting playful learning while providing opportunities for quality experiences and interactions (Saracho, 2004). Sociodramatic play is a type of play that is voluntary social role-taking of a group of children (Rajapaksha, 2016). Sociodramatic play happens when children act out stories and experiences while taking on make-believe roles. Sociodramatic play includes participation and negotiation from children which requires the use of oral language and vocabulary skills. In research on the impact of sociodramatic play Rajapaksha (2016) studied fifty preschool students and one teacher in Sri Lanka. The students had varying levels of literacy skills. The early literacy abilities were observed under two criteria: the student's ability to start conversations and the student's ability to engage in conversations with peers and adults appropriately. The abilities of the students were rated as not engaging, exploring, developing and building. The data was collected by videotape, observation, interviews, and journaling. The intervention lasted 3 weeks for 12 sessions. The dramatic play centers included: shop, market and dispensary. Rajapaksha (2016) found the sociodramatic play intervention created a rich language environment and gave children opportunities to express and develop oral language. The preschooler's oral language and expression became concrete and assertive with teacher facilitation and time. The researcher concluded that there was importance in sociodramatic play in the preschool setting. Sociodramatic play helps preschoolers gain literacy skills that are essential in everyday life. According to Rajapaksha (2016), sociodramatic play experiences lead to the development of

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abstract thinking, self-awareness, and self-regulation. These interactions with preschool children will help guide them with communication and experiences in the real world (Saraco, 2004).

Hall (2000) conducted research to see how preschool students developed literacy through social dramatic play. This study looked at 35 children ages 4-5 who attended a British school. The dramatic play center was a garage theme. The children took a field trip to a real garage to see how it looked and worked. When they returned to school they had the garage dramatic play center. The students made signs and created an office space. The teacher was involved and guided the students. She suggested the children write a letter to the town hall for permission to build something, and she modeled filling out an application for a job at the garage. The results of the research showed that through the use of sociodramatic play, students engaged in purposeful play. This activity helped develop literacy skills (Hall, 2000).

In a case study by Milelonen & Paterson (2009) a home was chosen to observe two 5-year old children in a naturalistic setting. The girls were observed playing in one of the children's bedrooms and in the backyard. The girls were from middle class socioeconomic families and both possessed above-average literacy skills. Data was collected through observation notes, video, interviews, drawings, journal reflections, and open-ended notes. The videos showed the girls playing and engaging with one another and allowed the researchers to closely look at patterns in language interactions. Interviews were done with who, what, where, when, why, and how questioning that was developmentally appropriate for the children. Spontaneous drawings from the girls were collected during the study and their emergent writing skills were evident on the papers. Journal reflections were done with a prompt given to the children; this was beneficial to the researcher to see what type of play was meaningful to the children. When the play was finished the girls were asked to finish this sentence "When I play I

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feel....” This also helped the researcher note how the children felt when they were involved in play. In this study the researchers found that children gain early literacy skills such as reading and writing through social peer interaction and play. The researchers also found that these skills were developed naturally through communication with peers and adults.

Following an analysis of the data collected the researchers concluded, “The girls were immersed in language the entire time they were playing. They communicated with each other using language each of them already knew and they constructed new language as well” (Mielonen & Paterson, p.27). The researchers found the benefits for play-based learning for language skills include oral language, complex cognitive abilities, reading and writing skills, challenges, experimentation, and negotiations. The results of this study found that young children develop early literacy skills including language, reading, and writing through social interaction by engaging in play (Mielonen & Paterson 2009).

According to Mielonen and Paterson (2009), early childhood educators should be role models and help initiate play and show children what play looks like. Teachers should encourage the symbolic processes, helping put meaning into objects and activities. Teachers should promote vocabulary and language growth by talking to and with their students. Educators should model problem solving such as in game playing. Educators should motivate emergent literacy skills and concepts of print; this can be done by reading together. Teachers should also promote positive engagement.

In a study conducted by Norling & Lillvist (2016) it was found that an array of play including dramatic play, free play, and teacher or child-initiated play supported preschooler’s development. The study took place in Sweden and the researcher videotaped the teachers and students during center time to gather their findings. Norling and Lillvist shared the importance

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of educators' timing in communication and engagement with preschoolers and the overall development of children. The research suggests that the teachers in the study were engaged and supportive of the preschooler's development in literacy-related play. The analysis concluded that the children were more responsive to open-ended questions in adult-initiated play.

Free play should be at the center of an exceptional early childhood program, (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Play is the medium that emergent literacy development is stimulated and play helps give preschoolers opportunities to use items associated with literacy before actual reading and writing begins (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Emergent literacy skills such as print concepts, alphabet recognition, sound recognition and other early literacy skills can be developed through play. Games, story book readings, dramatic play, and guided play all have connections with early literacy (Roskos, 2010).

Early childhood educators can use educational play as a strategy. Educational play is play that is planned by the educator to integrate play and learning goals (Einarsdottir, 2014). Educational play allows the teachers to connect the play with objectives and help students through experiences reach goals. Einarsdottir believed that play is a path that can lead towards the development and learning of children.

Johnson (2017) suggested that much research has demonstrated that even a little intervention promoting literacy can go a long way and enhance a student's literacy environment by book sharing. A strategy that can be used is BAGS. BAGS, an acronym for Books and Good Stuff, is a way for families to be involved in their child's literacy learning. The student takes a bag filled with developmentally appropriate books, manipulative, activities and a notebook for journaling home for a week (Zeece & Wallace, 2009). This activity is ideal for preschool-aged children and is a fun way to involve families.

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Barriers to Play-Based Curriculum

Puteh & Ali (2013) researched preschool teacher's perceptions of play-based learning in the classroom to see how their attitudes were towards play. The study included 12 teachers that were selected from a survey sample of teachers to be interviewed. The teachers were interviewed after they completed a survey questionnaire. Puteh & Ali's purpose was to understand teachers understanding of play for teaching literacy and also what challenges they may be faced with when using play as a teaching tool. They uncovered several reasons why teachers dislike play-based curriculums. Time allocation was the number one complaint; teachers felt they didn't have enough time to allow children adequate time to play. Many teachers felt that student behavior was out of control and they opted not to use a play-based curriculum. Some teachers reported there was not enough space for activities and for children to play in the classroom. The teachers stated they didn't know how to effectively make the space work. Private preschools felt their biggest hurdle to play-based learning was qualified preschool teachers. Public schools that had shortages in teachers also felt this problem. Support from school administrators and parents was also a challenge for teachers wanting to have a play-based curriculum classroom. Many teachers reported they stuck with direct instruction due to pressure from administrators and parents.

Administrators are heavily focused on a curricular program that is more test score based and less focused on play (Guirguis, 2018). Research conducted by the National Association of Elementary Principals found that 96% of surveyed elementary school students had at least one recess period throughout their day, however a decade later only around 70% of elementary students had at least one recess period per school day (Ginsburg, 2007). This means students are getting less time for physical outlets and play in the school setting. Many school districts are

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reducing recess and play and replacing it with efforts to focus on reading and math (Ginsburg, 2007).

It has been stated that teachers have a hard time making time for play-based learning. In Malaysia, the play-based curriculum is a practice that is preferred and teachers are encouraged to use play-based curriculum in their classrooms as learning through play is the most natural approach. A study in Malaysia conducted by Puteh and Ali (2013) used the survey method to obtain the data that they were searching for. The respondents included 51 educators from preschool education centers. The questionnaire was based on early literacy review on play and included 40 questions. The questionnaire used a rating scale to answer the questions. Twelve of the surveyed teachers were interviewed based on their willingness and consent. The questions were concerned with play-based learning for preschoolers in the academic area of literacy. The results of the study showed that academic qualification of the teacher didn't determine his or her perception of play-based curriculum for emergent literacy skills. Teachers that taught the least amount of time scored the lowest and were less likely to use play-based curriculum. Many teachers felt time was their biggest issue (Puteh & Ali, 2013).

Professional Development and Training

There is a lack or misconception in the definition of the word play that makes it hard to provide common recommendations for teachers and those who put together the curriculum (Puteh & Ali, 2013). Teachers, parents and administrators all see play as something different; which can lead to problems (Puteh & Ali, 2013). "We need more play-oriented research that systematically analyzes the effects and outcomes of different preschool curriculum practices, play-based and otherwise for children's learning and development" (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 4).

Some explanations on why teachers hold specific beliefs on literacy and play may be the

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amount of professional development in the area or the lack there of (Lynch & Owston, 2015).

According to Puteh & Ali, 2013, teachers that hold a two-year degree or less seem less dedicated to learning best practices. This often led to teacher-directed curriculum instead of play-based curriculum (Puteh & Ali, 2013). Research in early childhood should be conducted to determine the most effective types of training needed.

A study done by Ali, Aziz, & Majzub (2011) revealed teachers who incorporate play-based activities believe those activities improve students' early literacy skills. In their research quantitative and qualitative data was used. The quantitative data was collected using questionnaires, and the qualitative data was collected through observation. Four preschool teachers participated in the study along with 16 students per teacher. The teachers were given a set of six play-based activities and briefed on how to carry out the activity before the children arrived. Teachers conducted the activities in their classrooms over eight-weeks. The purpose of the activities was to give preschool students an opportunity for play-based learning literacy to improve their early literacy skills. The researcher was an observer during the intervention. When the eight-week period was over each teacher was given a questionnaire. The questionnaire was a scale: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Slightly Disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree. The results showed that 55% of the teachers selected strongly agree, 33% of the teachers selected agree, and 13% of teachers selected slightly disagree that teaching and learning through play helps improve early literacy skills. None of the teacher respondents chose disagree or strongly disagree. Preschool should allow for learning opportunities through play, which is developmentally appropriate for the students (Ali, et al., 2011).

Einarsdottir (2014) conducted research in Reykjavik, Iceland. The study was conducted with two preschool teacher participants. The preschool had sixty-three students in three groups.

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During the first phase the teachers were able to learn about action research and develop plans to improve their own practice. The first phase lasted six months. The second phase was the planning, where teachers attended workshops learning about action research studies, listened to expert presentations on collecting data and began to put their ideas into practice. During the third phase they worked with the children. During the fourth phase they were evaluated and reflected upon themselves. At the beginning of phase two the teachers tended to separate learning and play, but by phase three they found ways to connect emergent literacy activities into children's play routines. They prepared more for play and made literacy materials more available to the students.

Conclusion

Research has shown that early childhood programs can offer children opportunities to develop language and emergent literacy skills through play. Evidence suggests teacher intervention helps foster the relationship between play and learning and if done correctly, can have significant outcomes in early literacy skills. There is also evidence that there is still much needed research in the area of play-based learning and early literacy. Parents, teachers, administrators, and politicians believe something must be done to address the alarming literacy rate of elementary school students. Removing play as an instructional strategy in the early childhood classroom does not seem to be the answer to address that and in fact preschool programs may need to be expanded to allow sufficient time for both teacher-directed instruction and teacher-directed play. Early childhood teachers play an essential role in creating these experiences to obtain successful early literacy (Lynch, 2011).

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