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## **The Value of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms**

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**The Value of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms**

Courtney Hansmann

Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Education

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**Abstract**

This action research study investigated if students can make social-emotional and academic gains through play-based learning in an early childhood classroom. This action research answered the question: Can preschool students make academic and social gains in a play-based classroom within one school year? Preschool students were engaged in rich materials that helped in math, literacy, and language. Teachers were more intentional about their interactions with students and were more engaged. This research study was conducted throughout the 2021-2022 school year. Data was collected throughout the three GOLD checkpoints in the school year.

*Keywords: play-based learning, social-emotional, academics, early childhood*

### **The Value of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms**

Preschool students learn best through play. Researcher, Leong (2012) believes that students reach their highest developmental level through make-believe play. After much research done on this topic, play has been shown to improve many different skills in the early childhood classroom. Free play influences a child's brain through exploration, language expression, problem-solving, and thinking skills (Lynn, 2013). This action research project shows how play can positively impact academic and social-emotional skills in preschool students. The problem is that many people think that letting students play during school is not being productive, or that students are not learning much while playing.

The purpose of this action research is to find out how play-based learning affects academics and social-emotional skills in early childhood settings. Young students learn many skills and concepts through play, so it is important to show evidence of how play affects the learning of these students. The action research project highlights how to effectively incorporate play-based learning into a preschool curriculum.

The information from research studies included in this action plan was found in the DeWitt Library. Research is from peer-reviewed journals within the last 10 years on the topics of play-based learning and how it has positively affected students, teachers, and parents. Words used during the research of this topic are play-based learning, social-emotional, and academic benefits of play.

The question that this action research covers is: Can preschool students make academic and social gains in a play-based classroom within one school year? The findings of this question through research and GOLD Teaching Strategies data show that play-based learning does give

preschool students gains in both social-emotional skills and academics. Research shows that early childhood students have made positive gains in these skills by learning through play.

GOLD data in the classroom provided evidence that play positively affects learning.

This action research study covers the social-emotional and academic benefits of play. Documentation was conducted throughout the school year during three GOLD Teaching Strategies checkpoints. Data was obtained through anecdotal notes as well as assessments once per checkpoint. The research through peer-reviewed sources covers the types of play as well as the decline of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms. Categories that are discussed within the literature review are types of play, social-emotional and academic benefits of play, as well as the decline of play-based learning.

## Literature Review

### Types of Play

When it comes to play and learning in early childhood education, it is important to know what different types of play there are and how they each benefit a child's learning. Play is used in an early childhood classroom to support students' learning (Wickstrom, et al., 2019). Without play, young students would be missing out on many social and educational opportunities.

In a recent study by Wickstrom, et al. (2019), there are three types of play which are free play, guided play, and teacher-directed play. This study was conducted in 20 kindergarten classrooms that promote play. The results of the study showed how each type of play influenced math learning in early childhood classrooms. It was found that teacher-directed play showed the most math learning at 68%, while guided play was at 24% and free play at 8% (Wickstrom, et al., 2019). This is just one example of how different types of play influence a subject or topic.

Free play is when children are given the choice to play where they want to play, what they want to play, and who they want to play with. Play is the highest form of learning for early learners (Taylor, et al., 2020). Children must have a choice in their learning environment and play (Taylor, et al., 2020). Although free play is all about student choice, educators still play an important role. For example, teachers choose the play materials that are in the learning centers. According to the findings by researchers Taylor, et al. (2020), natural play materials are important in play. This study looked at how mathematical learning in a play-based classroom can be enhanced by technology. Teachers can learn a lot about how their students learn through play when they step into their students' shoes and get involved in both individual and partner play (Roden, et al., 2017).

Guided play is when children take the lead in their play-based environment, while teachers are there to guide them when needed. The teacher lets the child take the lead during play and doesn't disrupt them unless the child asks (Prairie, 2013). For example, when it comes to acting out scenarios in the dramatic play center, teachers can participate as a nonplayer or active participants. Participation from adults should be intentional but minimal. Adults may ask a few questions or use suggestions while playing (Prairie, 2013).

Teacher-directed play involves teachers directing child play in the classroom. There are many ways that teachers get involved in play-based learning. The implementation of play-based learning is affected by how an educator identifies the importance of it (Taylor, et al., 2020). Keung (2019) conducted a study on the importance of the "whole child" in play-based learning. According to the findings from Keung (2019), teachers have two roles in play. Teachers must prepare the play materials in the centers to create appropriate play, as well as be playmates to maintain the children's engagement. Open-ended materials must be provided by the teacher for children to use their imagination during play (Prairie, 2013). Educators should be intentional and thoughtful in how they integrate play into their classrooms.

### **Social-Emotional Benefits of Play**

There are many benefits of play in the early childhood classroom. One of those benefits includes social-emotional gains. The preschool years are a critical time for the development of many skills that are essential for long-term success in school (Dennis, et al., 2015). Preschool and kindergarten are where the highest level of development happens through make-believe play (Leong, et al., 2012).

Researchers Dennis, et al., (2015) explain how teachers can use planning and interventions to support social communication and competence within the context of play.



“Children’s engagement, learning, participation, and membership are promoted when a teacher intentionally plans for play-based opportunities.” (Dennis, et al., 2015) The problem solving that happens through play helps children examine new ideas, focus on skills, and investigate. Social-emotional skills also help with language and development delays as students learn through emotional regulation, friendship skills, and anger management. When using social communication in play, children express their feelings and obtain information in new and exciting ways.

Teacher assessment and scaffolding are an important and positive part of the learning environment for preschool students when it comes to make-believe play (Leong, et al., 2012). PRoPELS are elements of play that can be assessed and scaffolded: plan, roles, props, extended, language, scenario (Leong, et al., 2012). When teachers plan play scenarios and provide props and open-ended materials, students are more engaged in the play, therefore are gaining social-emotional skills. Background knowledge from field trips, books, or speakers can be used through play.

Many early childhood educators find it difficult to balance academic skills and using developmentally appropriate play-based instruction. A study conducted by Pyle, et al., (2015) compared how different play-based learning was in three different kindergarten classrooms. Observations and interviews were conducted with three different kindergarten teachers within four months on the topic of play-based learning. Each teacher had a different approach to play-based learning as well as different understandings of the purpose of play. It was found that play is peripheral to learning, a vehicle for emotional and social development, as well as for academic learning. Play-based environments help develop social skills, emotional skills, cognitive skills,

self-regulation, and communication (Pyle, et al., 2015). When teachers are involved in play, it can also benefit student language.

Findings from researchers Thomas, et al., (2011) found that teachers have many positive perspectives on play-based learning in early childhood education. It was found that cognitive and social development is linked to play in early childhood. When a teacher is guiding the play while still letting the child have control, children develop even further by being motivated and relaxed. Learning unfolds naturally through play, making it one of the best ways for students to gain social and emotional skills.

### **Academic Benefits of Play**

Another benefit of play-based learning in the early childhood classroom is academic gains. Play has been found to be beneficial for children's progress and growth in physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Pyle, et al., 2018). According to Bahlmann, et al., (2020), the best way to support children's academics is to create engaging stations based on the interests of the children. Guided play is structured to teach academic skills and future language and literacy abilities (Massey, 2013).

There are many aspects of student learning and development that are enhanced as well as supported during play (Pyle, et al., 2018). When there are correct learning materials in the play centers, it fosters literacy development. Early childhood academic standards have changed in the past few years, so teachers' perspectives of play may change from year to year.

Findings from Bahlmann, et al., (2020) talk about how teachers work naturally to integrate writing into play. Teachers expose children to early writing opportunities by being intentional with their ideas and instruction. Teachers must meet students where they are at by intentionally putting out materials that are appropriate for students. All play stations should have

writing opportunities, not just a writing center. Bahlmann, et al., (2020) explains that the level of adult support and quality of materials in the classroom motivates children to learn.

Researcher Massey (2013) talks about how early childhood educators promote language development in the classroom. A teacher's participation in guided play is pivotal in helping children incorporate literacy materials into their imaginative play (Massey, 2013). Play is a skill that helps children learn about their abilities such as intellectual, social, symbols, and language. Connecting stories and guided play give teachers a way to enhance students' vocabulary and comprehensive language skills. Props give children the opportunity to link real objects to text and have tools for story retelling, as well as encourage language and vocabulary development.

Guided play can be a powerful pedagogical tool according to Weisberg, et al., (2013). The pedagogical methods in preschool are direct instruction and free play. Playful learning enhances many things such as problem-solving abilities, problem-solving behaviors, and creative thinking. Guided play can encourage learning of mathematical and spatial skills, as well as allow teachers to ask open-ended questions. Teachers can enhance the explorations of learning and discovery with guided play that is child-directed. Playful pedagogy can reduce stress, and cultivate pride and self-confidence in children (Weisberg, et al., 2013).

There are many skills that teachers can use in the early childhood classroom to foster children's play skills of representation and self-regulation to support learning. Prairie (2013) explains how self-regulation helps children collaborate with peers, stay on task, follow rules, and control their impulses. Open-ended materials should be provided in the classroom to help children use their imagination with play and learning. Seeing real-life scenarios help children act them out during play. Teachers can help students learn through play by following the child's lead

and being a nonplayer or active participant. Adult participation should be intentional but minimal, using questions and suggestions (Prairie, 2013).

### **The Decline of Play-Based Learning**

There has recently been a decline in play-based learning in the last ten years. Educators and parents all have different opinions when it comes to using technology both in the classroom and at home (Johnston, et al., 2018). Many factors play into this decline. One of those factors is technology in the classroom. Johnston, et al. (2018) did research on the integration of technology in early childhood classrooms. Technologies in early childhood classrooms can be computers, light tables, or even non-functioning keyboards. Frequent use of technology can distract children, especially when it is used at both home and school. Children must have an awareness of technologies and the digital world. Some educators believe that children's learning and experiences come from technology. Educators use technological resources with other resources to find meaningful ways of learning in early childhood education (Johnston, et al., 2018). Technology alongside other tools can support the development of children along with their critical thinking skills.

Technology is another factor that has been found to take over play-based learning. Miller (2018) did research on the topic of mathematical apps and learning numeracy skills in the early childhood setting. The children were drawn to the apps that had bling and fun characters. The use of mathematical apps slightly enhanced children's learning of mathematics, but the learning wasn't significant. Interactive technology helped children with collaboration, ability, and maturity. These are all skills needed in a play-based environment. The use of technology can help prepare children for the technological world. It was concluded that iPads do not hinder early learning of numeracy and literacy (Miller, 2018).

Play fosters improvements in math, language, literacy, and socio-emotional skills (Lynch, 2015). From the eyes of kindergarten teachers and administration, many challenges come with teaching play. Teachers find challenges in finding time between play and academic standards. Some people think that more valuable learning activities should take place over play-based learning (Lynch, 2015). Many kindergarten teachers think that play-based learning is important, but they do not have time in a day for it because of the rigorous curriculum they need to do each day. Administration may have a tough time believing in the value of play-based learning, and it can be looked down upon. Many teachers have changed their labels from "play centers" to "work centers". Play has been found to help children learn how to cooperate and engage with others appropriately.

### **How Parents Can Help With the Decline**

Parents can help with the decline of play-based learning in many ways. One way is having parents participate in school activities. It is found that parent involvement in school is a big factor in child success (Lynn, 2013). Early puzzle play is something that can help early learners with their spatial skills (Levine, et al., 2012). Parents can help their children with these skills by providing puzzles at home. This puzzle play can improve the language of both parents and children. According to Levine, et al., (2012), children from high social-economic status groups performed better on spatial skills because their parents had higher education. Parents can also provide more difficult puzzles for their children to gain even more spatial language and puzzle play.

Payne (2013) did research on children's play-based learning who was in low-income or high-income homes. It was found that children in high-income homes had more literacy-rich experiences than their peers. By the time children from educated, high-income homes are three

years old, they have heard 33 million words, whereas children from low-income homes have heard only 10 million words (Payne, 2013). Parents can help this gap by playing with their children, helping them explore, and reading to them to gain those literacy skills and experiences.

Play is a vital role in helping young learners succeed. Different types of play such as free play or guided play can help students learn to take the lead and use their environment and peers around them to learn new skills. Play benefits both social-emotional and academic skills in early childhood students. With rich materials that are based on students' interests, students gain skills in a short time (Sumsion, et al., 2014). Although some factors have affected play in the past few years, there are ways that both educators and parents can have a positive impact on play and learning.

## **Methods**

### **Methodology**

The research question for this plan is ‘How can play-based learning positively impact academic and social-emotional skills in preschool students?’ The Teaching Strategies GOLD scores are the variables that are subject to change throughout each of the three checkpoints. This action research was completed in a preschool classroom with 14 students. The students are four and five years old. There is one student on an individualized education plan (IEP) for speech. No other students are on IEPs or other education plans. The study was on play-based learning; therefore, observation was done during choice time. Choice time takes place for one hour each day, where students are free to choose what centers they want to play at, as well as which friends they want to play with.

The interventions that took place were revisions to the play-based environment. To help students grow academically, teachers were more intentional with what materials and manipulatives were placed within the centers. More number sense activities were placed in centers to help with skills about quantifying. To help students grow social-emotionally, adults in the classroom were present more often during play. They would give play scenarios to guide students, as well as let students take the lead.

Data collection was done throughout the entire school year. Data is collected each day during choice time and then compiled together at the end of each checkpoint to figure out what level each student is at. There are three checkpoints total that were completed. The data is collected electronically through the Teaching Strategies GOLD website and app. At the end of each day, observational data is put into the system. When data is put into the system, it is dated,

notes are written, pictures are placed if applicable, and students are chosen based on if they were a part of that observation. This method keeps data collection consistent and accurate.

Data were analyzed after each checkpoint to see if students have made progress in both social-emotional and academic skills after the interventions took place. The interventions took place during the second and third checkpoints. Four and five-year-old preschool students must be within the blue band of the Teaching Strategies GOLD objectives to be proficient. To determine social-emotional skills, objective 3b: solves social problems were observed. To determine academic skills, objective 20b: quantifies was observed.

This action research project was IRB exempted through Northwestern College, Orange City, IA. Normal educational practices for gathering GOLD data were implemented as part of this research. The research was conducted in the preschool classroom as it always has been, and it did not adversely impact students' learning or teacher assessment.

### **Data Collection**

For this action research, the data collected was qualitative. The data includes the first, second, and third Teaching Strategies GOLD checkpoints for the 2021-2022 school year. Two objectives were observed for this research; 3b: solves social problems and 20b: quantifies. Four and five-year-old preschool students must be within the blue band. The blue band for 3b is between 5-7, and for 20b is between 4-6. The first checkpoint, which was before the observations, was a baseline for where preschool students were within these objectives. Scores were looked at for objectives 3b and 20b to determine what support students needed during play. Revisions were then made to the classroom to make play-based learning better than before. Teachers were more present during play, following the students' lead and giving play scenarios



when needed. Teachers and paraprofessionals were more intentional with what was put in each play center. Materials were placed based on what the students needed to work on and what their interests were. More number sense activities were placed in play centers as well to help with quantifying. Integration also took place as the general education preschool class integrated with the early childhood special education class during choice time. With these supports put in place during play, students gained both social-emotional and academic skills. This was proven through Teaching Strategies GOLD scores going up in both the second and third checkpoints.

## **Findings**

### **Data Analysis**

Tables 1 and 2 below show the two GOLD standards, 3b and 20b, that were observed during choice time. The tables show the three checkpoints that were looked at throughout the school year. The data shows where students are based on the GOLD standards. For objective 3b, students should be between levels 5-7. For objective 20b, students should be between levels 4-6. Both 3b and 20b data show many students were not proficient in the first checkpoint. With interventions that took place during play, almost all students made gains towards proficiency during the second checkpoint. With continued interventions, all students ended up being proficient during the third checkpoint. Overall, the action research was successful in helping students learn through play-based learning.

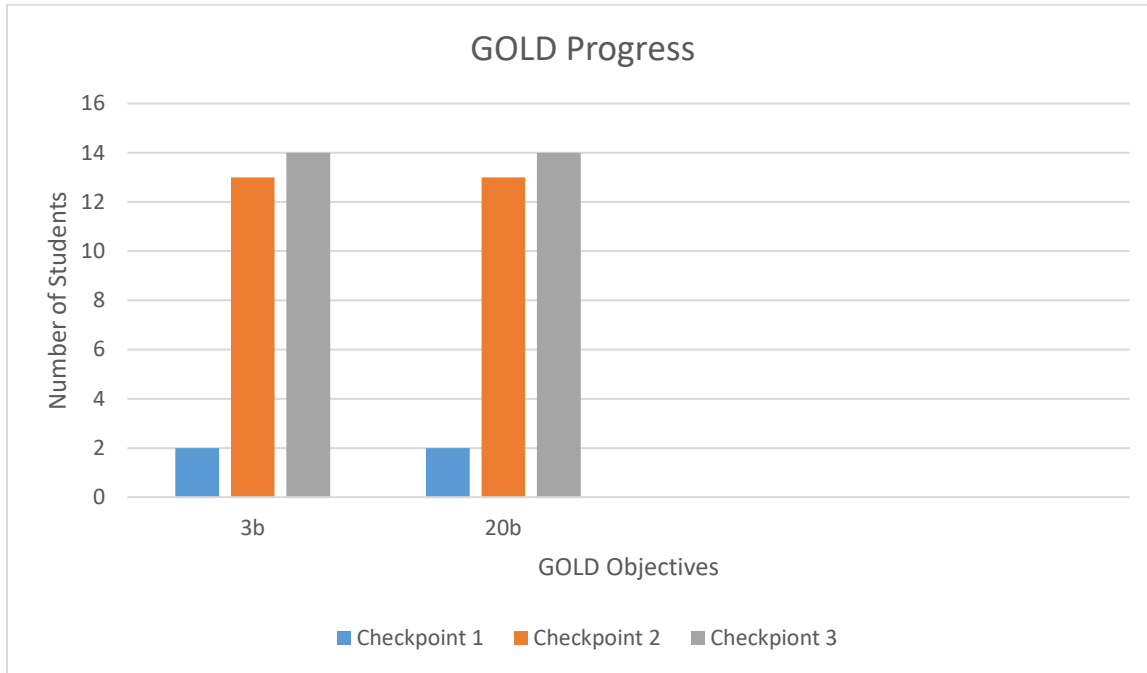
**Table 1**

<b>Student (3b)</b>	<b>Checkpoint 1</b>	<b>Checkpoint 2</b>	<b>Checkpoint 3</b>	<b>3b-students should be between 5-7</b>			
1	4	6	7				
2	4	5	6				
3	4	5	6	<b>Checkpoint 1</b>	2 (7.5) [4.03]	12 (6.5) [4.65]	14
4	4	6	7	<b>Checkpoint 2</b>	13 (7.5) [4.03]	1 (6.5) [4.65]	14
5	4	5	6	<b>Checkpoint 3</b>	14 (10.12)	0	14
6	4	6	7	<b>Marginal Column Totals</b>	29	13	42 (Grand Total)
7	4	5	6				
8	5	6	7				
9	4	5	6				
10	4	6	7				
11	4	6	7				
12	4	5	7				
13	5	6	7				
14	4	4	5				

<b>Student (20b)</b>	<b>Checkpoint 1</b>	<b>Checkpoint 2</b>	<b>Checkpoint 3</b>	<b>20b-students should be between 4-6</b>			
1	3	5	6				
2	3	4	5				
3	3	4	5	<b>Checkpoint 1</b>	2 (7.5) [4.03]	12 (6.5) [4.65]	14
4	3	4	5	<b>Checkpoint 2</b>	13 (7.5) [4.03]	1 (6.5) [4.65]	14
5	3	4	6	<b>Checkpoint 3</b>	14 (10.12)	0	14
6	4	5	6	<b>Marginal Column Totals</b>	29	13	42 (Grand Total)
7	3	4	5				
8	3	4	6				
9	4	5	7				
10	3	4	5				
11	3	4	5				
12	3	3	4				
13	3	5	6				
14	3	4	5				

**Table 2**



## Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings

The action research results show that the supports put in place during play were successful. Students made gains in objectives 3b and 20b in both the second and third checkpoints. In checkpoint one, before the supports took place, only two students were proficient in each objective. This means that two out of fourteen students were below a 5-year-old level. After supports were put in place, thirteen students were proficient, and one student did not reach proficiency during the second checkpoint. Supports were again taken place during the third checkpoint, where all fourteen students were proficient and at a 5-year-old level.

After reviewing the findings of the action research, they have shown to have a huge impact on both teaching and learning. Because of the results from the first checkpoint, teachers started putting in more effort to find supports that were successful for the students in the class. Because of the supports, student play and learning increased substantially.

The findings in this action research plan reflect much of the published literature discussed. Many researchers found gains in both social-emotional and academic learning when there was rich, thought-out play happening in the preschool classroom each day. When teachers are prepared to use supports and meet the needs of each child, their learning abilities increase. This is what was proven in this action research project. The limitations of the study were during playtime only. Social-emotional learning, as well as academics, were observed during free-choice time.

**Further Study**

The next step will be to continue implementing the interventions this year and next year. Interventions will start at the beginning of the year next year to see if they make a difference in GOLD data during the first checkpoint. Teachers will continue to be more intentional in the learning materials they use as well as the play materials that are placed in the learning centers. Data will be collected more often to see if specific implemented materials are making more of a difference in both academic and social-emotional skills.

Parental involvement can be improved next year to help students gain the skills they need. Parents can be given the proper information to help their children learn while playing. Information about the positives of play-based learning can also be given to other preschool and kindergarten teachers so they can start implementing new ideas into their classrooms. Having other early childhood educators in the school district do their own research on this topic can be eye-opening as they may not realize how much play-based learning affects young learners.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides support in the preschool classroom by using class-wide interventions in the play-based learning environment. The problem that led to these interventions being put in place was parents and community members having the opinion that students were not being productive or learning while playing during school. The fourteen students participating in this action research benefited from the interventions that took place during play. The results of this study indicate that play-based learning has a huge impact on both academic and social-emotional skills. Both educators and parents can be of help when it comes to implementing play-based learning in the classroom.

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