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Promoting More Play in Kindergarten

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Promoting More Play in Kindergarten: A School Improvement Plan

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

Kindergarten has changed immensely over the years. It is currently driven by academic standards. Kindergarten teachers use much of the day to implement direct instruction and seat work to meet the higher demands in reading and math. The problem is that this type of learning is not developmentally appropriate for kindergarteners. Research shows that play is the central way in which children at the kindergarten age learn. To be developmentally appropriate, this school improvement plan aims at initiating more time spent playing during the kindergarten day.

Keywords: kindergarten, play, learning through play, developmentally appropriate

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Kindergarten has seen a multitude of changes throughout the years. From 1900 to around 1950, formal reading instruction was not started until the age of six and a half because they believed most children did not have adequate mental development to learn to read at an earlier age (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Today, the Common Core State Standards for kindergarten reading have 10 standards in reading literature, informational texts, and 15 base reading skills (Costantino-Lane, 2019, p. 586). Students are expected to be able to read emergent-reader books or texts. Kindergarten teachers are required to teach reading to students even though some students don't recognize their letters, are unfamiliar with books, or are unaccustomed with the day-to-day routines at school (Costantino-Lane, 2019). In addition to more academic requirements, the typical day of a kindergartner looks much different than it used to. Time for play in kindergarten has changed to a large amount of time spent on teacher directed lessons that are long and involve working on academic skills (Rand & Morrow, 2021). The reason kindergarten classrooms have little time for play is because the teachers are trying to keep up with academic standards, testing students, and various policies set up by the school district (Costantino-Lane, 2019). The problem with current kindergarten classrooms is that they are developmentally inappropriate. Developmentally appropriate practice would involve more learning through play.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to promote more learning through play in kindergarten. Kindergarten students at Kinsey Elementary in Sioux Center, Iowa currently get twenty minutes a day of play time. Five percent of the current kindergarten day is spent valuing free play. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that children have sustained opportunities for play daily (2020). In their position statement, NAEYC (2020) states that play is "The central teaching practice that facilitates young children's

development and learning” (p. 9). Since children need enough time to play and it is central to their learning, this school improvement plan recommends fifteen percent of the seven-hour kindergarten school day be devoted to free play. The suggested percentage ends up being about one hour of playtime. The research in this school improvement plan will show that play can help develop a child academically, socially, emotionally, and support an overall more positive attitude about school (Riley & Jones, 2010).

Research for this literature review was acquired from the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. The primary source of information was found in scholarly journals. All scholarly journals included in this literature review were published within the past ten years. The articles focus on the value of play in a kindergarten classroom. When analyzed as a whole, the journals used in this school improvement plan prove in their research how play can help a child learn and develop as a whole child.

The research shows that including more play in the kindergarten classroom will benefit students in four fundamental ways. Play can help develop a child academically. For instance, play has been shown to help with literacy skills (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Children also learn social skills that can help them with future adult relationships (Greve et al., 2014). In addition, play gives children time to practice emotional skills such as self-regulation (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014). Play is proven to give children happiness which also helps support an overall more positive outlook on school (Lee et al., 2020). I believe that when kindergarten students at Kinsey Elementary are given more time to play, the administrators, teachers, and parents will see the students gain academic knowledge and skills, achieve social skills, acquire some emotional intelligence, and have a more positive perception of school.

The literature review is organized into themes that present the value of more time spent on play in the kindergarten classroom. First the literature review will discuss how play experiences help kindergartners learn academic skills that are developmentally appropriate. Next the literature review will discuss how the additional time of play will help students to improve and acquire lifetime needed social and emotional skills. After that, the literature review will explain how time given to play in the kindergarten classroom builds a foundation for students to have a love for learning and a more positive perception of school as well as have a more positive transition from preschool to kindergarten. Finally, the literature review will consider how more time to play gives opportunities for teachers to develop and strengthen relationships with students when support is given from parents and colleagues.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

From birth to age eight, an enormous amount of development and learning occurs in a child. Play is the most developmentally appropriate way in which children can learn. Although play may look different in every culture, play is a universal way in which children learn about themselves and about the world around them (NAEYC, 2020). It is important for educators and parents to understand that play can be a time of learning. Children can learn academic skills and gain knowledge through time spent in play. NAEYC (2020) says, “self-directed play, guided play, and playful learning, skillfully supported by early childhood educators, build academic language, deepen conceptual development, and support reflective and intentional approaches to learning—all of which add up to effective strategies for long-term success” (p. 10).

Learning Academic Skills Through Play

Kindergarten has changed dramatically over the years. Tina Costantino-Lane completed a qualitative study in 2019 in San Bernardino County, California. The study involved interviewing

teachers who had been teaching for long terms about changes that have occurred over the years in kindergarten. The requirements for the teachers were that they had taught prior to the California state standards that were implemented in 1997 and continued teaching through 2010 when Common Core was implemented. The number of changes that occurred during that time in kindergarten is astounding (Costantino-Lane, 2019). The participants reported that “Developmental strategies are disappearing from their classrooms and have been replaced with phonics, phonemic awareness, and reading lessons. These teachers stated that in the developmental kindergartens of the past, they used the strategies of discovery, exploration, experiences, and play. In addition, some said they used to have time for flannel board stories and dramatic readings” (Costantino-Lane, 2019, p.590).

The changes in kindergarten have resulted in more seat work and less play. Unfortunately, many adults do not see the value in play. Play is often looked at as a fun activity, but not as a time for developmental progress. The intention for less play is to meet standards and common core requirements. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines developmentally appropriate practice in their position statement as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning” (2020, p. 5). In other words, play is a big part of the most ideal situation for a child to learn and develop. One of the ways in which a child develops is academically. To the surprise of most people, children can learn academics while playing.

Play can help children learn a variety of language skills, vocabulary words, and narrative discourse. The center where language and literacy skills are most likely to be practiced is in the dramatic play center. It is at this center where students are often communicating with peers to practice language, learning, and using new vocabulary during their communication, and creating

their own story using their imaginations (Rand & Morrow, 2021). During a study conducted in Ontario, Canada, researchers observed whether literacy concepts were observed during play time at twelve different kindergartens. They found that when teachers get involved in play or use techniques to extend the children's play, then literacy skills are more likely to be practiced and used during play (Pyle et al., 2018). In addition, when teachers are involved in play, they can model scaffolding. When scaffolding is modeled to one student, the chances are likely that the student then models that same scaffolding with another peer. These practices help maximize learning (Costantino-Lane, 2019).

Another study proved that play helps Title I students to improve their literacy learning. The study was conducted in Florida with 30 Title I students. They tested the hypothesis that Title I kindergarten students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would show greater gains in receptive vocabulary and literacy learning when purposeful play is incorporated. Two kindergarten classes used the same curriculum, but one classroom was instructed by the teacher while the other used play-based learning. Results of the study showed that children in the teacher centered classroom showed greater growth in receptive vocabulary while children in the play-based classroom showed greater growth in literacy learning (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021). In other words, students in both types of classrooms made gains in literacy, but they learned different concepts. The findings ultimately show that combining both didactic teaching and play based learning is the best way for all children to learn literacy concepts (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021).

Further research shows how imagination acts as a bridge between play and learning within everyday kindergarten practice. Videos, observations, photos, parental interviews, and teacher interviews of 24 kindergarten students in Southeastern Australia were used to collect data

to show that imagination can help form both theoretical knowledge and concept formation (Fleer, 2011). Theoretical knowledge helps children to understand how something is done or how a process works. Concept formation is a higher order thinking that helps children to sort experiences and help with gaining future knowledge. The study also concludes that current kindergarten teachers need to have individualized play and learning to have higher outcomes for students. In addition, the study shows that play can truly be a part of kindergarten education (Fleer, 2011). In other words, play allows kindergarteners to gain and practice higher order thinking skills that help with further learning and acquisition of skills.

It may seem that meeting standards is most important, but the National Association for the Education of Young Children describes how important it is to teach the whole child. NAEYC (2020) says, “Kindergartens and grades 1-3 tend to be considered elementary or primary education, and, as such, may have increasingly prioritized cognitive learning at the expense of physical, social, emotional, and linguistic development. But integrating cognitive, emotional, social, interpersonal skills and self-regulatory competencies better prepares children for more challenging academic content and learning experiences” (p. 9). It is important to teach the whole child and play is ideal for students to practice physical skills, emotional skills, academic skills, and to develop their linguistic skills.

In the *Early Childhood Education Journal* in 2019, the authors Taylor and Boyer discuss play-based learning. Play-based learning or PBL is “Child-centered and focuses on children’s development, interests and abilities through engaging and developmentally appropriate structuring of academic learning experiences” (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p. 127). With this information and discussion of types of play, the authors recommend that teachers purposely choose certain activities to teach various concepts. For example, students can learn about

money, numbers, and writing when given the opportunity to have a store. In addition, the authors recommend that teachers intentionally extend play in the classroom by asking questions that further the thinking of children and extending their play. Using these two practices can help children to acquire new knowledge and to practice academic skills while still having the opportunity to be developmentally appropriate (Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

A study done in Malaysia in which 30 children were observed showed that unstructured play can help the whole child develop. The authors collected data using video and notes to find out what children learn during play. They discovered that children could learn cooperation through play. Knowledge and skills are gained through imitation during play too. Finally, play can help children learn through trial and error. They have an opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them (Fatai et al., 2014).

Social and Emotional Skills Learned Through Play

Play has more than academic benefits. Play also improves the social and emotional skills of children. Social and emotional skills that are crucial for their future. Some examples of skills that children can learn through play include how to have conversations with peers, proper social ways to communicate or share ideas, self-regulation, and they learn various rules of play. The rules that children gain include learning to take turns, sharing, or helping to clean up after play. In addition, children learn to resolve conflicts, work together, and problem solve which are critical skills for their future (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Research conducted in Northern Colorado found that students who were part of a play-based preschool showed signs of being strong communicators as well as capable of showing empathy. The research goal was to find out the school readiness of four five-year-old children entering kindergarten who had attended a Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood education

center. Reggio Emilia centers are known to be play based centers. The research was gathered using a case study approach over a nine-month period. They conducted interviews with participants, parents, and teachers at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Through their research they found four different commonalities between the students who had gone to a play-based preschool. They found the children were much more skilled communicators than their peers who had not attended a play-based preschool. They defined a communicator as “A child who demonstrates self- advocacy, conflict management or relationship-building skills” (Fyffe et al., 2022, p. 9). In other words, a child who can communicate their needs, a child that has the skills to work out a problem with a peer, and a child who knows how to build and develop relationships. Another skill that the play based preschool students showed was empathy. They were able to show acts of kindness and back and forth conversations and interactions with their peers. In addition, the teachers noticed an overall strength in connecting with others and communicating with their peers (Fyffe et al., 2022). Play allowed these children to practice social skills and become stronger at communication and empathizing with others.

In addition to communicating and relating to others, the emotional state of a kindergartner is equally important. Mary E. Lyons conducted a study in 2022 which she observed how play can help a child transition from preschool to kindergarten. The study was conducted over a period of four months. They discovered that one of the benefits of having play in kindergarten was that it helped the child to develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Lyons, 2022). Specifically, this means that play helps a child to feel control of their behavior. Play also helps children to experience mastery or the ability to do something successfully. Mastery is developed because play gives them time to practice. Finally, play helps children to connect and relate to others. The research notes that nearly half of today’s kindergarten students

struggle with transitioning from a play-based preschool to an academic focused kindergarten. However, adding play to the kindergarten pedagogy helps students to have an improved transition (Lyons, 2022). Although this research is important to consider and value, it is important to understand that this was the transition of one child from preschool to kindergarten. A study that included observations and notes of more students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten would be valuable in gaining more data and insight on the benefits of play and transitioning to kindergarten.

Social and emotional skills are important for the future of any child. The National Association for the Education of Young Children says in their Developmentally Appropriate practice position statement that “Self-directed play, guided play, and playful learning, skillfully supported by early childhood educators, build academic language, deepen conceptual development, and support reflective and intentional approaches to learning—all of which add up to effective strategies for long-term success” (p. 10). A research study conducted in Germany questioned 134 adults from the ages 20-66 years old. Participants found their questionnaires in various public locations and were not forced to fill out the questionnaire. The questions required participants to recall their childhood experiences and used certain pre-determined aspects of social success to discover what their developmental social status was. The findings show that free play during childhood is a predictor of social success in adulthood. Adults who experienced playing as children have skills such as self-esteem, ability to adjust goals, and psychological health all of which help establish stronger social skills as an adult (Greve et al., 2014). Playing as a child allows for practicing and developing essential qualities that make for a successful adult.

Play Helps Transition to Kindergarten and have a Positive Attitude about Kindergarten

When children transition from preschool to kindergarten, they are dealing with transitioning to new relationships, more demanding academics, new classroom rules and routines, and other new challenges and transitions. “It has been reported that 22% of Australian children experience difficulty during their transition to school in at least one of the following domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, and emotional maturity” (Lee et al., 2020, p. 12). This transition period has been known to have a major influence on children’s feelings about school and their academic, psychological, and social outcomes for their adult life (Harrison & Murray, 2014). In other words, the transition from preschool to kindergarten can really affect the abilities of a child socially, emotionally, and academically. It is important to ensure kindergarten is a positive experience as the feelings and experiences kindergartners have in kindergarten, can have lifelong repercussions (Harrison & Murray, 2014). Incorporating play into the school day can help children to have a successful transition to kindergarten and a positive view of school (Lee et al., 2020).

A three year-long qualitative research study done in Texas explored how kindergartners expected kindergarten to be and then what they thought of kindergarten once attending kindergarten. Data was collected through interviewing 19 kindergarten students after they watched a video produced by the researchers that showed what a day of kindergarten was like. After the video, the children would be asked questions about whether the video showed what kindergarten was about, what they might add to the video, or what changes they would make to the video about kindergarten. Schedules of the kindergarten classrooms, memos from observations, and filming of the interviews were also used to collect data. The findings showed four main themes from the kindergarten students. Most of the kindergarten students believed that

kindergarten was a place to get smarter, learn behaviors, and a place they like to be. The final theme that many students expressed was making kindergarten “funner” (Brown, 2018, p. 17). Kindergartners wanted to do more of the activities that they really enjoyed. The activities that kindergartners enjoyed were centered around more play. In essence, children associate play with fun. The activities that these students considered more fun in this study include physical education, recess, and center time (Brown, 2018). The study shows that kindergartners desire more play and consider play to be fun. Center time can be a time of playful learning that children will associate with the emotion of fun.

Another quasi-experimental study conducted in Hong Kong researched whether unstructured free play and mindfulness interventions promote success and enjoyment among preschoolers. The research method involved 42 children aged four to six years old, attending two different kindergarten classrooms. One classroom was the control group while the other classroom got one hour of unstructured play with loose parts play material and 10 mins of mindfulness intervention each day. The experiment was done over a five-day period and included questionnaires for parents, pedometers, stadiometers, weight scales, and psychometric scales for children. They found that unstructured play and mindfulness activities can help promote a child’s well-being by increasing gaiety and playfulness. In addition, the findings suggest that providing opportunities for unstructured play and mindfulness activities can help children transition from preschool to kindergarten (Lee et al., 2020). This study has limitations in size of sample and amount of time studying the interventions, but the research still coincides with the benefits we know play can offer. Educators can support safety, belonging, and transitioning to new experiences by allowing children to express their interests in learning and involving them in the activities of learning (NAEYC, 2020). Guided play is an opportunity for

teachers and students to work together towards knowledge and skills as well as a positive transition to kindergarten.

A positive transition to kindergarten is just as important as the view a child has about school. Kindergarten students nowadays are subject to more explicit instruction, standard based testing, and are expected to learn more academic content. These expectations are very different from preschool and some children experience stress. The stress that they experience can hinder their learning and development. The stress can always cause students to develop a negative attitude towards school (Lee et al., 2020).

A qualitative study conducted in Western Australia for eight months researched what strategies teachers use to support kindergartener's social and emotional development? The study was done at eight different private Catholic schools and involved 130 kindergarten students and eight kindergarten teachers. To obtain data, the study used observations in classrooms, interviews with the teachers, and themes from data were analyzed. It was found that one teacher's strategies seemed to help her students exceedingly more. All the teachers agreed that play was important, but only one teacher named Kyra found ways to use play for teaching moments or guide a child's understanding during play. The research found that there were three main reasons that Kyra could make teaching moments and scaffold a child's understanding. Kyra had relationships with her students, she planned play for her students, and the classroom environment supported play. The environment in Kyra's classroom was physically set up for play, but also the environment was one where relationships were encouraged, and children's engagement was promoted. Since the environment and atmosphere encouraged relationships and learning, children were empowered as learners and felt comfortable in their environment (Kirk & MacCallum, 2017). This study exemplifies how play and an enthusiastic learning environment

with teacher-student relationships enables students to grow in their knowledge and have a positive attitude about school.

Teacher Perspective on Children's Play

When it comes to kindergarten, teachers face many pressures for students to meet standards. For this reason, many teachers don't think there is enough time to include play in the kindergarten day. Even though the standards state what children should know, standards do not state how teachers need to teach. The Common Core acknowledges that play is a valuable activity that can help students learn the standards (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Another attribute play can contribute to is the attitude of the teacher.

A qualitative study was done in the Shanghai Municipality and Zhejiang Province where they researched whether free play improves teachers' awareness and practice of loving care. Eight kindergarten teachers from six different kindergarteners were interviewed individually and together after promoting free play in their classrooms. The teachers allowed one hour of free play in their classrooms while also being given guidance on observing and understanding the different play occurring in their classrooms. Four themes were apparent after the research was analyzed. One theme was a change from teachers feeling like they must care for their students to a desire and appreciation of each student. The teachers were able to observe and guide children and had a chance to appreciate their different interests and skills. The second theme of the study found a shift in the definition of loving care from teachers. After allowing more free play, teachers understood that loving care is mutual respect, appreciating individuality, and sympathy to students. In other words, teachers saw their role as a teacher was to see each child for who they were, respect them, and care meant being sensitive to their needs. Free play also allowed teachers to experience a continual loving care and a happiness they were previously missing.

Prior to having time spent on free play, the teachers were frustrated or upset when students were unable to meet expectations. The free play allowed teachers to experience happiness and renewed their care for students. The final theme of this study was that teachers felt their loving care for students extended further than it ever had before because of the hour of free play they implemented. They had an opportunity to see children for who they really are and their characteristics. In addition, they could observe how students learn. In this study, play reignited the love of their students for teachers and allowed them to gain new perspectives of each child. Play was a positive experience for both students and teachers (Zhang et al., 2022).

A separate study conducted in Hong Kong explored the teachers' and parents' perspectives on learning in play. The research aimed at answering what the perspectives on play were for teachers and parents as well as finding similarities and differences within these perspectives. Fourteen teachers and six parents were involved in this qualitative study. The mosaic approach which involves interpreting and reflecting on learning in play was used. First, videos of play were taken. From those videos, the researchers with teachers chose four videos that clearly showed play episodes. The videos were then shown to parents and teachers after which questions and interviews reflecting on the videos were conducted. The findings from this study show that parents and teachers agree that play can be beneficial if there is necessary discipline in the classroom, there is more freedom to be able to play, and teachers intervene during play to guide learning (Wu, 2020). Parents and teachers can agree that play can be advantageous when certain characteristics within the classroom exist. However, in this study many Chinese parents doubt the value of learning. Parental doubt in the value of play creates a difficult environment for teachers to practice implementing play. When teachers and parents can find the positive outcomes that can come from play, the child can benefit both developmentally

and academically. Parents' understanding of the value of play can provide the needed support for teachers to implement play.

Another conducted in Hong Kong explored what behaviors make a teacher implement play-based learning. The method of research was surveying 542 kindergarten teachers from 40 different Hong Kong kindergartens. The teachers that were involved had been part of a project through the universities and schools that promoted play by helping teachers improve implementing and designing more play opportunities for their kindergartners. After the project, voluntary participation questionnaires were sent out to the kindergarten teachers. The results of the questionnaires revealed that play-based learning is best implemented when the principal and other colleagues have a trusting relationship with the teacher. When kindergarten teachers feel reliable to try new strategies, teachers are more likely to believe that they can succeed. Both self-efficacy and trusting relationships help kindergarten teachers more likely to implement play-based learning (Yin et al., 2021). In other words, teachers need to feel that principals back them up and trust that they will implement worthwhile play experiences. They also need trusting relationships with colleagues to sustain their confidence in planning play-based activities. Kindergarten teachers will plan for play, but they need the necessary support to do so.

School Profile & Baseline

Community Characteristics

Kinsey Elementary is found in Sioux Center, Iowa where the population is 8,229 according to the 2020 Census. Within the Sioux Center population, 85.9% of the people are white, 10.7% are Hispanics, 2% are two or more races, 1.1% are Asian, 0.4% are Black or African American, and 0.1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The median household income is \$80,955 and 5.3% of the population of Sioux Center

live in poverty. The percent of the population that is 16 years or older and that work in the civilian labor force is 73.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

The community is made up of multiple schools that include Dordt University, a Christian school that serves TK-8 grade, and a private preschool. There are also 20 different religious congregations as well as a variety of different businesses that are in Sioux Center (About Sioux Center, 2023). The businesses worked with the school district to create a Portrait of a graduate after businesses noticed the lack of certain skills with people entering the workforce after graduating. The portrait of the graduate is encouraged and taught at the school so students graduate with skills and characteristics that are needed and can be used for the rest of their life. To develop the portrait of a graduate characteristics in students, the school partners with parents, teachers, the community, business leaders and school administration to offer opportunities to practice and use the necessary skills. They partner together to uphold their mission of teaching the whole student for a whole lifetime (Sioux Center School District, 2023).

School District Mission and Vision

The Sioux Center School District is made up of five different campuses. There is a Little Warriors Preschool, Kinsey Elementary which serves K-3, an Intermediate school that serves 4th and 5th grades, a Middle school that serves 6th-8th grade, and a High School that serves 9th-12th grade. The mission of the Sioux Center School District is to educate the whole student for a whole lifetime. Sioux Center promotes six different values that they want their students to exemplify. These values are known as a portrait of a graduate. The values include students who can work with a variety of people, can communicate respectfully, and respect diversity. In addition, the district values creativity, physical well-being, and determination as a learner. To achieve the mission and vision, the Sioux Center School District provides a supportive learning

environment, feedback to learners, and curriculum and instruction that prepares students for college, career, and life (Sioux Center School District, 2023).

Current Student Learning Goals

Kinsey elementary strives to have 80% of students reach a targeted growth goal in reading and math in the MAPS test. The goal was met in reading last year but was missed by 2% in math. Typically, in years past the Kinsey kindergarten classes are at a growth rate around 72%. ESL students make achieving this goal difficult. The goal of Kinsey staff is to get ESL students within 5% of the growth rate of other non-ESL students (Lentel, 2023).

School Building Characteristics

Kinsey Elementary is a K-3 school in Northwest Iowa that serves students from the town of Sioux Center, Iowa. During the 2022 school year, 505 students were enrolled at Kinsey Elementary. The students were 50.7% white, 43.8% Hispanic, 2.8% Multi-racial, 1.2% Black/African American, 1 % Native American, 0.2% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.4 % are Asian. Male students make up 55% of the student body while 45 % are females (Department of Education, Iowa, 2018). A kindergarten day at Kinsey consists of 90 minutes of literacy time where they work on phonics, language, and reading. The rest of the day includes math instruction, lunch, recesses, and 20 minutes of center or play time. The students also get 40 minutes of time each day for specials such as music, physical education, library, guidance, and art. In FAST testing (Formative Assessment System for Teachers) which measures pre-reading skills, 54% of Kinsey's kindergarten students were at or above the benchmark. The state's target is 80% by the end of the year. In the MAPS testing for reading, 47% of students were at or above normal. In MAPS math, 53% of Kinsey kindergarten students were at or above expected norms. These scores include transitional kindergarten, junior kindergarten, and kindergarten

students because the state does not distinguish between these programs and considers all of them to be kindergarten (Lentel, 2023).

Parent Involvement

In the Sioux Center School District, parents stay informed through accessibility to Infinite Campus which is a student information system that allows parents to see grades, transcripts and test scores, and schedules. In addition, parents can send and receive information, pictures, and messages through the Seesaw app. Teachers also communicate with parents via email, weekly newsletters, and grade level Facebook pages. Finally, the Sioux Center School District has a webpage and social media accounts where parents can see current events. Parents are seen as essential partners with the school (Sioux Center CSD, n.d.). Parents can further get involved with the Sioux Center School District by participating in the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), reading with kids, helping in classrooms, assisting during field trips, coming for lunch, or serving on the school board.

Teacher Work

Kinsey Elementary has the goal that teachers will “engage in continuous learning as well as seek opportunities for leadership development” (Sioux Center School District, 2023). One of the ways in which teachers can continue their learning is through observing their colleagues. Kinsey Elementary has a requirement known as “Warrior Walks.” Twice a year, teachers must observe a colleague teach a lesson that they are interested in improving on or want to learn more about. After the observation, the two teachers give feedback and ideas on how to improve the lesson. Teachers at Kinsey are also aligning all rubrics to the Iowa Core learning standards, so teachers and parents can easily see where students are performing for each standard. In addition to this, teachers work on incorporating Habits of the Mind to their teaching (Lentel, 2023).

Habits of the Mind is a research-based framework that has teachers incorporating 16 different habits into the classroom. The habits include characteristics such as persisting, communicating, or taking risks that can help an individual improve themselves as well as being a positive contributor to the community (The Habits of Mind, 2023).

Curriculum

Kinsey Elementary recently updated their math curriculum. They previously used GoMath, but it discontinued publication, so iReady was chosen as the new math curriculum. The draw towards the iReady curriculum was a tool that allows teachers assign skills that will help the student improve where students are lacking. The reading curriculum uses ReadyGEN for reading and Really Great Reading for phonics. The school determined that students were struggling with phonics, so they recently added Really Great Reading to their curriculum. Kinsey utilizes rubrics to determine which standards students are meeting. These rubrics are included on report cards for parents to see exactly how their child is performing on various standards. The report cards also show how the child is doing on various assessments required by the school.

Instructional Strategies

Each kindergarten teacher is pursuing to make sure their instruction is tailored to each student, so they can meet the 80% targeted growth rate. For this reason, the main type of instruction used is individualized differentiated instruction. Teachers are constantly looking at where each of their students are at and where they want them to be. Teachers strive to have a good, firm grasp of where students are at in the learning continuum. The environment is structured to meet the needs of the students and meet standards or requirements of the state. In addition, teachers use small group instruction and (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol)

(SIOP). SIOP is an instructional strategy that helps the needs of English learners by correlating components in aspects such as building background, comprehensible input, interacting, teaching strategies, practicing, applying the lessons, lesson delivery, review, and assessing (Lentel, 2023).

Assessment Practices

Students' learning is assessed in a variety of ways. FAST (Formative Assessment System for Teachers) is an assessment used to screen and progress monitor student's reading. MAPS (Measure of Academic Progress) is another assessment the district uses. MAPS measures the progress of a child in reading, math, and language usage. Another assessment used by the district is the IReady Placement Test for math. The test gives information on a child's grade level performance compared to national norms. The district also conducts STAR reading and STAR Math assessments. STAR reading and math assessments test a child's knowledge of reading and language or math skills to help screen, monitor progress, and set goals for students. In addition to the stated assessments, the district has quarterly assessments in reading and math. Teachers use generic assessments that include questioning students on identification of letters, sounds of letters, identification of numbers, and other kindergarten requirements. These assessments are not formal, but simply to gauge where students are on the learning continuum (Lentel, 2023).

Professional Development

Professional development at Kinsey Elementary is individualized for each teacher. Teachers take self-assessments to find areas of development that they want to improve on. Kinsey wants professional development to be applicable to all teachers and for teachers to not be trained on things they have already had training on. In addition to the individualized professional development, Kinsey also does some training for the regular teachers on math because they just

started a new curriculum. If a teacher doesn't teach math, their professional development can be over their individualized professional development. Every Wednesday, Kinsey teachers meet for power hour. Power hour is a collaboration of teachers to improve instruction. They specifically focus on learning needs. Most of the time power hour is used to focus on individualized needs, but at times is used to do things such as schedule parent teacher conferences (Lentel, 2023).

Needs Assessment

Although Kinsey is a quality elementary school, there is always room for improvement. When analyzing the profile of the school, one can see that the curriculum and instruction should be improved to better support the ESL students. Currently, 50% of kindergarteners at Kinsey Elementary do not know how to speak English. Each of those students comes to kindergarten with different experiences and different learning backgrounds. In fact, many kindergarteners are not coming to kindergarten with any background knowledge. Half of the students at Kinsey have not attended preschool or any type of educational setting prior to starting kindergarten (Lentel, 2023). The kindergarten curriculum and instruction need to support all students with all abilities.

To support all children, more time should be spent on play or playful activities. Currently, the twenty minutes of center time does not give enough time for students to talk to their peers to learn language, play with the peers to learn social and emotional skills, or learn concepts through developmentally appropriate practice. A study done in Florida found that, "A burgeoning area of research encouraging purposeful, focused play-based, developmentally appropriate practices as effective interventions to increase educational equity for vulnerable students" (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021, pg. 127). More time spent on play can help bridge the gap between the different abilities among kindergarten students. In their statement for

developmentally appropriate practice, NAEYC explains that there is a continuum of learning that ranges from direct instruction to free play. NAEYC states, “Effective, developmentally appropriate practice does not mean simply letting children play in the absence of a planned learning environment, nor does it mean predominantly offering direct instruction. In the middle of the continuum is guided play. Educators create learning environments that reflect children’s interests; they provide sustained time and opportunities for children to engage in self-directed play” (2020, p. 9).

Kinsey Elementary uses predominantly direct instruction or small group instruction. There is very little time for any type of play. Changing the instruction to offer play can provide a developmentally appropriate classroom where all children regardless of their abilities can grow socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically throughout the kindergarten day. Children can practice social skills by learning to share, cooperating with friends, problem solving, and practicing adapting to changing situations. These skills are lifelong skills that help children to be socially successful (Greve et al., 2014). Extra time spent on play can allow children to also gain emotional skills. Children gain confidence, learn self-regulation, and have opportunities to practice appropriate interactions and communication with other children. Cognitively, children grasp concepts and understanding when they have more opportunities to learn through play. When children use their imaginations, they can sort their experiences and develop concept formation. Concept formation is an important foundation for all future high order thinking and learning. More time for play also enhances academic learning because it allows children to expend their current knowledge and experiences while communicating and interacting with other children (Fleer, 2011). When children have opportunities to play, they also grow physically. Play helps children to develop an overall healthy physical well-being while also learning and

growing their motor skills (Fyffe et al., 2022). In short, increasing time for play helps the entire child to flourish and thrive in a developmentally appropriate way.

Data Analysis

When considering whether changes need to be made at Kinsey Elementary, it is important to analyze data to determine whether current teaching practices and routines are working to produce desired results. Figure 1 (below) shows that 60% of non-ESL students were at or above the benchmark for the FAST Bridge reading test at the end of the kindergarten year at Kinsey Elementary. FAST bridge tests students for vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension (Illuminate Education, 2023). The results show that over half of the students were at the benchmark, but the state of Iowa desires for schools to end kindergarten with 80% of students at or above the benchmark. Since only 60% of students were at or above benchmark, non-ESL students at Kinsey Elementary did not meet the state goal.

Figure 1

Non-ESL Students FAST Bridge Early Reading Test

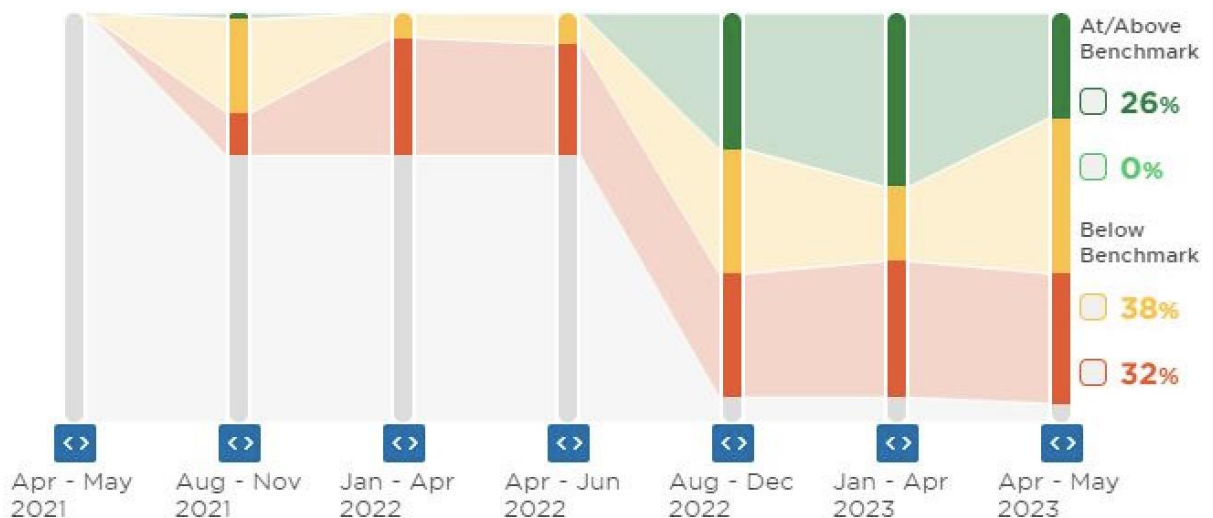
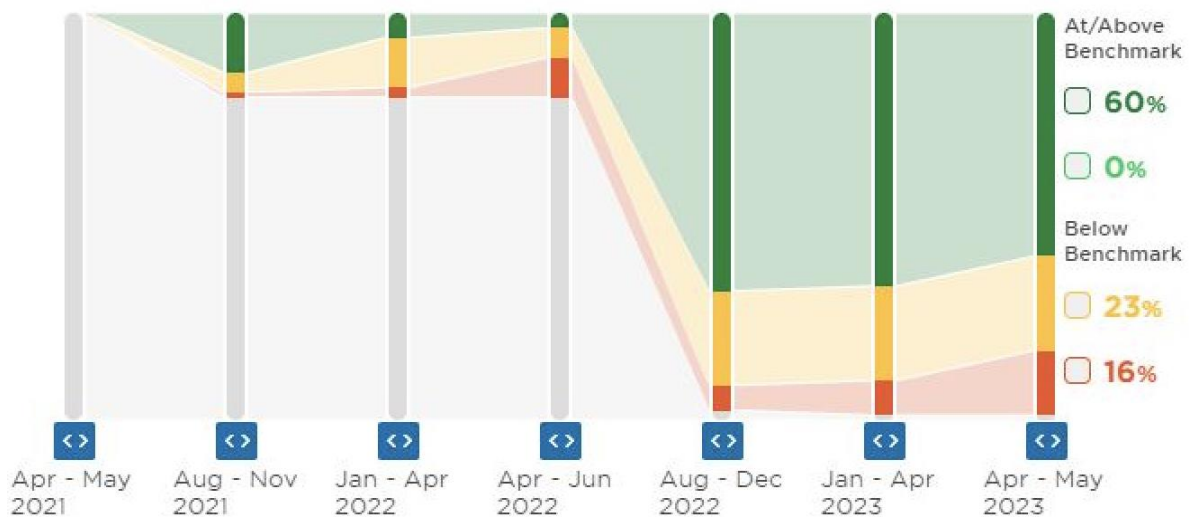


Figure 2 (below) shows the results for the ESL kindergartens students at Kinsey Elementary. Only 26 % of ESL students were at or above the benchmark for the FAST Bridge Early Reading Test. Again, this is well below the state target percentage of 80%. Kinsey Elementary is below the state target of 80% for non-ESL students and ESL students (Lentel, 2023). The FAST Bridge Assessments show that reading skills are lacking in kindergarten students by the end of the year. Whether students are still learning English or not, there are still students at Kinsey Elementary who need to strengthen their reading skills to meet Fast Bridge reading benchmarks.

Figure 2

ESL Students FAST Bridge Early Reading Test

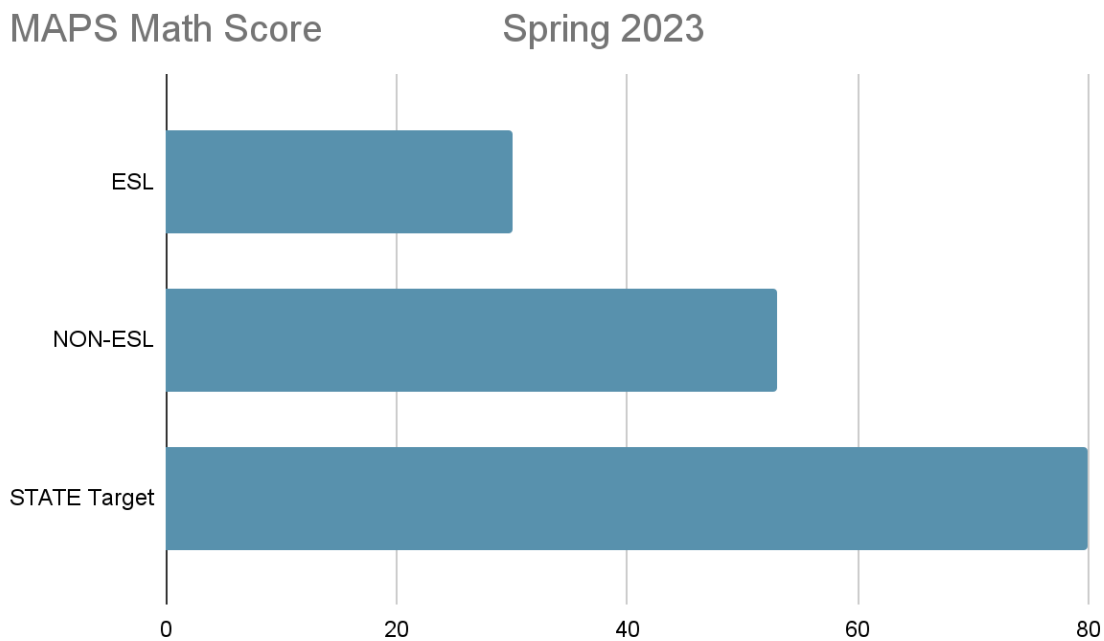


Reading is not the only subject in which kindergarteners at Kinsey Elementary are struggling. Kindergarten math skills are also lower than the state of Iowa prefers. Figure 3 (below) shows the results for the ESL and Non-ESL kindergarten students MAPS test. The MAPS test can assess both reading and math, but Figure 3 (below) shows results from the MAPS math assessment. Kindergarteners are tested on various math skills such as computation, number

sense, measurement, geometry, statistics and probability, and algebra (Map Test Kindergarten: Information & Practice, 2023). At Kinsey Elementary, ESL students had 30% at or above benchmarks on the MAPS math assessment while 53% of non-ESL students scored at or above benchmark (Lentel, 2023). Both groups of students were below the state’s target of 80% at or above the benchmark in Math. These results indicate that changes need to be made so 80% of students can be at or above the math MAPS benchmark.

Figure 3

Kinsey Elementary Maps Math Scores



It is important to note that TK, Junior Kindergarten, and Kindergarten student scores are all included within these test results because the state of Iowa does not currently group these students separately. However, the data still shows that students need improvement in both math and reading skills. The data shows that it is not one group of students that are not meeting the benchmark. Neither the non-ESL or the ESL students at Kinsey Elementary are reaching the

target goal of 80% of the students at or above the benchmark in math and reading. The data shows that changes need to be made to improve test scores at Kinsey Elementary.

Action Plan

Based on the information and data collection from Kinsey Elementary, action needs to be taken to strengthen reading and math skills in kindergarten. The purpose of this school improvement plan is to promote more learning through play in kindergarten. The problem is that current kindergarten classrooms are developmentally inappropriate. Play is a developmentally appropriate activity for kindergarten students to improve or practice their reading and math skills (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). In fact, NAEYC says that play is the central way in which children learn. However, children need a sustained amount of time to truly get the benefits that play has to offer (NAEYC, 2020). Time in play allows teachers to bring play, a developmentally appropriate activity for students, together with new information or skills. In other words, students can unite what they know which is play with information the teacher wants them to learn (Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

The first step to implement more play in kindergarten at Kinsey Elementary is to educate administrators, teachers, and parents about the benefits of play. Teachers and administrators will have a few professional development days prior to the start of the school year where they will learn how research shows that play can help develop a child academically, socially, emotionally, and support an overall more positive attitude about school (Riley & Jones, 2010). The training will demonstrate how adding extra play time to the kindergarten schedule can help students transition from preschool to kindergarten which can lessen stress and prevent stress from interfering with student learning (Lee et al., 2020). They will also learn that the extra time spent on play will give students opportunities to improve their language skills, practice their

social and emotional skills, and to have the opportunity to use their problem-solving skills (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). The training will occur before school starts, but also occur quarterly so administrators and teachers are able to discuss progress as well as share ideas and reignite their dedication to ensuring kindergarten is developmentally appropriate. Once teachers have been trained, parents will receive information about kindergarten changes at their back-to-school kindergarten night. Teachers will briefly explain that Kinsey Elementary is changing their schedule to be more developmentally appropriate for kindergartners. In addition, parents will receive an email that highlights the benefits of play.

An additional training will be needed specifically for the kindergarten teachers at Kinsey Elementary. The training will help the teachers discover how teacher participation in play is valuable for students. Teachers can extend play by modeling and scaffolding new ideas or additions to play. Children often mimic the modeled behavior to their peers to further extend learning. The best benefit for students and teachers when teachers get involved in play is that relationships are developed and strengthened. Strong relationships lead to a classroom environment where students and teachers understand each other and learning is heightened (Pyle et al., 2018). There will be training before the start of the school year and once a month throughout the school year, so teachers are able to continually enhance this aspect of learning through play.

The final aspect of the school improvement plan that will take place is sharing the revised schedule for the kindergarten day with administrators, teachers, staff, and parents. The schedule will be explained at the training sessions to administrators, teachers, and staff. Parents will learn about the schedule change at the back-to-school night, in the weekly emails, and the revised schedule will be on display at the Sioux Center School District website. Communication between

administrations, teachers, staff, and parents is crucial for the plan of increasing play to have favorable results (Yin et al., 2021).

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

The implementation of this school improvement plan will take the entire school year. The plan begins with explaining the benefits of play to administrators, teachers, staff, and parents prior to the start of the school year. The new kindergarten schedule will then be presented. Kinsey Elementary math and reading scores will be improved by including a sustained amount of play to their kindergarten day. Currently, there is twenty minutes of time planned for centers during the kindergarten day. The amount of play being proposed is 15% of the school day or one hour of playtime. Table 4 (below) shows the changes from the current schedule to the proposed schedule. Table 4 exhibits that the schedule is essentially the same except that calendar time is before lunch recess in the new schedule and reading, writer’s workshop, and math are shortened anywhere from five to fifteen minutes.

Table 4

Kinsey Elementary Daily Schedule

Current schedule	Proposed New Schedule
8:00-8:30 Morning Work/Attendance/Pledge	8:00-8:30 Morning Work/Attendance/Pledge
8:30-10:00 Daily 5 Reading Instruction/Snack	8:30-9:45 Daily 5 Reading Instruction/ Snack
10:00-10:15- Recess	9:45-10:00- Recess
10:15-10:40 Writer’s Workshop	10:00-10:30 Writer’s Workshop

10:45-11:35 Specials	10:30-11:15 Specials
11:35-12:05 Lunch	11:15-11:30 Calendar
12:05-12:35 Recess	11:30-12:00 Lunch
12:40-1:00 Rest time/ Storytime	12:00-12:30 Recess
1:00-1:15- Calendar	12:30-12:50 Rest time/ Storytime
1:20-2:30 Math	12:50-1:50 Math
2:30-2:50- Centers	1:50-2:50 Centers
2:30-3:00 Prepare to Dismiss	2:50-3:00 Prepare to Dismiss
3:00-3:05 Dismiss	3:00-3:05 Dismiss

Once the increased time in play is implemented, the teachers and administrators will use their regular testing to determine the success rate of the school improvement plan. The MAPS reading and math tests as well as the FAST Bridge reading tests will be conducted in the fall, winter, and spring. Teachers and administrators will analyze the results of the assessments to determine which skills and concepts need to be practiced during center time. The kindergarten teachers will meet to plan and formulate ideas for using play to help improve the skills and concepts in which students are lacking. The goal is for 80% of students to be at or above the benchmark by spring in all assessments. In 2023, ESL students had 30% at or above benchmarks on the MAPS math assessment while 53% of non-ESL students scored at or above benchmark. Only 26 % of ESL students were at or above the benchmark for the FAST Bridge Early Reading Test while that 60% of non-ESL students were at or above the benchmark (Lentel, 2023). Since

implementing more play is a considerable change for all educators, it is expected to take 3-5 years for the goal of 80 % of students at or above the benchmark. In addition to the typical testing conducted at Kinsey Elementary, teachers will also monitor their students throughout the year. Students will be monitored for meeting standards throughout the year. When students are unable to progress to skills or concepts, the teacher will use guided play to help children learn the skills and concepts they are lacking.

For this improvement plan to be successful, it is important that everyone involved can fulfill their responsibilities. The administrator needs to lead by setting up necessary training, communicate all ideas and changes to teachers, staff, and parents, and actively support the teachers. Support from the administrator will allow teachers to excel at implementing and guiding learning through play. The role of the teachers is to do their best at ensuring learning in kindergarten is developmentally appropriate as well as using their newfound knowledge to implement play-based strategies and guided learning during center time.

The most likely challenge or barrier to implementing this school improvement plan is how play is often viewed. Play is usually seen as a time for children to have fun. Most parents and some teachers and educators struggle to see how learning takes place during play. It is important that all parties are informed on how children learn through play. If parents, teachers, and educators can watch children play and then see skills or concepts they are practicing or learning, then their view of play is likely to change. When they understand how children learn, they are more likely to support more time in play.

Conclusion

The typical day of a kindergartner looks much different than it used to. Time for play in kindergarten has changed to a large amount of time spent on teacher directed lessons that are

long and involve working on academic skills (Rand & Morrow, 2021). The problem with current kindergarten classrooms is that they are not developmentally appropriate. Students are often seen completing seat work, being tested, and given less time to play. Developmentally appropriate practice would involve more learning through play. For example, retelling a story using puppets or students writing their own menu during play are a couple of examples of learning or skills being practiced during play. Research shows that play can help develop a child academically, socially, emotionally, and it can support an overall more positive attitude about school (Riley & Jones, 2010). This school improvement plan proves that children can attain knowledge and skills through play. Play can help develop a child academically. For instance, play has been shown to help with literacy skills (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Children also learn social skills that can help them with future adult relationships (Greve et al., 2014). In addition, play gives children time to practice emotional skills such as self-regulation (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014). Play is proven to give children happiness which also helps support an overall more positive outlook on school (Lee et al., 2020).

This school improvement plan illustrates that play is clearly a leading way for children to learn. Play is a developmentally appropriate and allows children to achieve concepts and skills. Kinsey Elementary can improve reading and math scores by implementing more time for kindergarten students to play. Since play helps to develop the whole child, implementing more play at Kinsey Elementary ensures a considerable number of positive changes. Students will learn and grow to improve test scores. Students will also improve their social and emotional skills which has a lasting positive effect on their future. Students will be well-rounded individuals who have the foundation needed to be strong citizens within the community and

future work force. Allowing children to learn developmentally appropriately now can have lasting positive effects on the individual as well as the community.

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