EFFECTS OF PLAY ON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN’S
ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Studies have shown how play can greatly affect the development of language and academic skills. Children need to be exposed to social and cognitive learning through play in their pre-kindergarten years in order to foster their development and to support a positive, successful school experience by allowing students to get the most from their learning. Since schools are becoming more and more competitive, the factor of learning through play must be studied to help reduce the number of children being retained or placed in special education. Research suggested that play has a positive impact on students’ cognitive, social, and language development in the younger years. However, it appeared as though once children entered about third or fourth grade, early exposure to learning did not in fact pose a significant difference. The effectiveness of play must examined in the older elementary grades (i.e. third grade) to see if playful, interactive learning has a beneficial impact on students when they get older.
American citizens need to realize the impact play has on all young children. In recent years, more and more concern has arisen about early elementary children lacking the necessary skills for success, as the number of children encountering difficulties has increased (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). As Ramey and Ramey (2004) suggested, exceptional numbers of children start kindergarten already having major delays in language and basic academic skills. Studies have shown how play can greatly affect the development of these skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Burrington, 2006; Doctoroff, Greer, Arnold, 2006; Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2008; Honig, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Roskos & Christie, 2001; Rowe, 1998). Families should not wait until their children are struggling or failing in school before they get them help. Waiting until these children fail in school leads to holding children back to repeat a grade. Typically, this does not sufficiently help the child to perform at grade level. In fact, the scientific evidence affirms that children who do not have positive early transitions to school—that is, those children who have early failure experiences in school—are those most likely to become inattentive, disruptive, or withdrawn. Later, these same students are the most likely to drop out of school early; to engage in irresponsible, dangerous, and illegal behaviors; to become teen parents; and to depend on welfare and numerous public assistance programs for survival (Ramey & Ramey, 2004, p. 473).

Children’s brains are like sponges at such a young age. They need to be exposed to social and cognitive learning through play in their pre-kindergarten years in order to prevent setbacks later in school and to be successful. Then, students need to have this playful, interactive learning continued as they are learning in their later elementary years to maintain growth. This literature review is going to take a look at the importance play has on a child’s cognitive and social
development and show why it is important for further research to be conducted to see how
playful, interactive learning affects students as they continue their journey through elementary
school.
Statement of the Problem

As schools are getting more and more competitive and expectations of children seem to be greatly rising, the factor of learning through play must be looked at. Society and educators are putting more and more pressure on students to learn that some of the basic fundamentals of learning (i.e. playing) are getting lost in the younger ages. Because of this, students are eventually becoming retained or placed in special education classes. Therefore, the factor of learning through play must be looked at to help reduce the number of children being retained or placed in special education.
Research Questions
Given the overwhelming evidence that play is vital to children’s academic and social development, how can schools foster child play and interactive learning in the high-stakes testing era?

Definition of Terms
Dramatic play – when children use make-believe transformations of objects and role-playing to act out scripts and stories they invent (Rowe, 1998)
Negative affect – facial expressions, body movements, language, or sounds indicating a negative emotional state such as frowning, pouting, sulking, crying, head hanging down, whining, screaming, angry or sad expression (Doctoroff et. al, 2006)
Prosocial behavior – cooperative interactions with peers such as having a pleasant conversation, sharing, positive interactive peer play, or any other positive involvement that does not involve misbehavior (Doctoroff et. al, 2006)
Solitary play – playing alone without verbal or nonverbal interactions with peers such as playing with blocks alone or drawing near others without interacting (Doctoroff et. al, 2006)
Symbolic agent – refers to what or to whom play is directed (Hanline et. al., 2008)
Symbolic complexity – refers to the number and inter-relatedness of schemas used in play and the relationship between the schemas in which the child engages while playing (Hanline et. al. 2008)
Symbolic substitution – refers to children’s ability to move farther away from actual objects in their sociodramatic play, providing evidence of the child’s ability to think more abstractly (Hanline et. al., 2008).
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this portion of the literature review, the importance of teaching cognitive skills, the development of social competence, and the importance of play will be discussed. Evidence will be provided showing the impact these factors have on children’s development.

Teaching Cognitive Skills

Children’s minds are substantially more capable of learning information at a much younger age than once thought. As the saying goes, a child’s brain is like a sponge. Early learning through play is likely to present significant gains in future learning and development. Many children start kindergarten already behind in basic language and academic skills. Parents should not wait until their children are already behind in school before seeking remedial help for them to catch up. In a recent report, Bowman et al. (2000) suggested that children are more capable learners than previously thought and quality educational preschool experiences contribute to a positive learning.

When teaching academics, teachers should choose intellectually challenging content that connects with young children’s abilities and interests (Hyson, 2003). By incorporating interactive play or hands-on learning, learning will make a connection to their lives. Learning will be personally meaningful. If learning does not relate to their lives, the learning will not have an impact on their brain. Vygotsky theory supporters argue that young children easily remember the names of dinosaurs or Pokemon characters but take longer to learn their phone numbers or the letters of the alphabet (Bodrova & Leong, 2005a). Young children learn also by repetition. Children will be more likely to remember something if the teacher presents the material in a repetitive and exciting way and then reinforces the skill taught by incorporating the skill in a playful game or activity.
Rowe (1998) conducted a study over nine months to find out how children learn literacy in their everyday lives. Rowe used two different samples. The first group was a parent’s-day-out program for parents needing part-time daycare. The classroom in which she worked with and observed consisted of 16 children. She was present every Wednesday and Friday for a total of five hours each day. On one of the days, a few children were absent due to the fact that some kids attended on Mondays and Fridays. All of the children were Caucasian and came from middle-class families. It was also noted that the parents of the children read to their children on a weekly basis and most read daily.

The second study consisted of Rowe’s son, Christopher, who was 2 years, 4 months old. He also had many experiences with books and, like many of his peers at the parent’s-day-out program, was a theme-based learner which means he pursued identifiable personal learning interests such as playing with tools or dinosaurs over a long period of time.

Rowe and her research team, consisting of school staff and a research assistant, used qualitative methods for conducting their research of the preschool and her son. As they were conducting their research of the preschool, they were constantly making changes in their literacy curriculum as a result of their observations of the children’s responses. In collecting their data, they used observation notes of the children, informal interviewing, parent surveys, collection of artifacts, and video recordings. When Rowe reported on her observations and experiences of her child at home, she found that they used book themes as a foundation for of their play. She even went as far as to support connections to books by helping him create props and talked to him about the connections he was making. Many times she also suggested book-related play to her son. Data may have been skewed due to the fact the second sample was Rowe’s son, which suggests this may have produced biased results. It is important to keep in mind that all subjects
involved were White and from middle class families which may also pose skewed results. When analyzing the data, Rowe used the constant comparative method.

Rowe (1998) broke down her findings into six properties to describe the nature of book-related play in the home and in the school-based studies: (a) the scope of play, (b) the type of connection between books and play scripts, (c) children’s purposes for play, (d) the kinds of social interaction involved, (e) the perspective explored, and (f) the sign systems used and their relation to book-reading events (p. 21). The first two properties – scope and connection – were aimed at providing an overview of some unique characteristics of the play occurrences observed in the study. The last four properties – purpose, social interaction, perspective, and sign systems – were most significant for constructing hypotheses concerning the role of book-related dramatic play in the children’s literacy learning.

The first property, the scope of play, was described as children using a favorite character or scene of a book to initiate play, rather than using the whole story as their basis for playing. The second property, the type of connections between books and play scripts, research gathered that dramatic play episodes seemed to attract originality and allowed children to connect to books in ways that were interesting to them at the present time. The third property, children’s purposes for play, Rowe found that play was a means of making connections to their familiar, playful ways of understanding and interacting with the world, as well as a means of making decisions about social interaction patterns, the perspectives explored, and the sign systems used in constructing book-related play scripts. The fourth property, the kinds of social interaction involved, Rowe found her hypothesis to be true that social interactions served to build their personal interpretations in ways that were shared with others. The fifth property, the perspective explored, Rowe’s data demonstrated that dramatic play was an adaptable and supportive means
for taking on the perspective of authors or illustrators and their characters. The sixth property, the \textit{sign systems} used, sometimes children borrowed the language from the book and used it verbatim in their play, whereas in other instances, their play required transmediation which is the expression of meanings constructed in one sign system through other sign systems (Rowe, 1998).

In conclusion, the findings from the study supported Rowe’s hypothesis that dramatic play played an important role of investigation and expression for the group of children and an important method of learning about books and the world. It involved verbal and nonverbal communication through gestures and using objects for children to express meanings. Book-related dramatic play was a context for literacy learning and it served as a vital part in the children’s literacy-learning processes.

\textbf{Development of Social Competence}

Social competence refers to “an array of abilities, behaviors, and responses directed toward other people that serve to build positive human relationships” (Jalongo, 2006, p. 8). This should be the stepping-stone to learning. Children need to learn how to act socially. Social behavior is a learned behavior that takes time and patience and can be learned through playing. Children learn through modeled behavior. “Children’s development at this [pre-school] age is highly influenced by the environment to which they are exposed, and preschool children’s home, community, and educational environments differ substantially” (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003, p. 3). If social competence is not taught correctly, children will struggle to interact in social contexts. For instance, if a child lives in a house where yelling is the predominant way of solving problems, the child will only know to yell when in conflict. Children act in ways such as their role models therefore the importance of children being associated with positive role models is essential.
Oral language is of great importance. Learning social skills also promotes language
development. As children increase their skills in social and emotional areas, children also build
language and problem solving skills, in addition to creative-thinking, memory, and abstract-
thinking skills (Burrington, 2006). Children develop vocabulary through playing with other
children and adults. With these interactions, children develop relationships enabling the ability to
learn to think (Brazelton, 2006b). Emotional interactions are the foundation of most of a child’s
intellectual abilities, including creativity and abstract thinking skills. Including human dramas in
pretend play – such as dolls hugging or fighting – aids a child in learning to connect an image to
a wish and then use this image to think (Brazelton, 2006a). Knowing this, the importance of
nurturing emotional relationships must act as the primary groundwork for both intellectual and
social growth. In addition, children who are exposed to a rich and highly interactive language
environment are at a greater advantage than those who are not. Being exposed to such language
allows children to acquire strong oral language skills themselves. Furthermore, learning to read
is vital for success in school. Being exposed in a highly interactive and rich language
environment aids children into acquiring strong oral language development which then leads to
phonological awareness (Ramey & Ramey, 2004).

Doctoroff, Greer, and Arnold (2006), investigated the relationships between social
behaviors and emergent literacy among young children. The participants consisted of 123
ethnically and socio-economically diverse preschoolers who were recruited from six childcare
centers (15 classrooms) in an urban New England area. The mean age of all 63 girls and 60 boys
was 4.5 years old (Range = 3.2-5.3). A letter was sent home to the participants’ parents from
their preschool to inform them about the study and 64% agreed to participate. The sample of
children who participated in the study may not be a true representation of all preschools due the families not willing to participate.

The methods used in this study were qualitative and quantitative, using demographic questionnaires, video recordings, standardized tests, as well as the *Expressive One Word Vocabulary Test-Revised*, the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised*, the *Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities*, and the *Developmental Skills Checklist*.

On the *Expressive One Word Vocabulary Test-Revised* which tests a student’s expressive vocabulary, students performed below average in comparison to national norms. The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised* was used to assess student’s receptive vocabulary skills. Students also scored below average in comparison to national norms. On the *Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities* which was used to measure children’s verbal fluency, students scored in the average range. On the Developing Skills Checklist, specific subtests were used to assess students auditory and print concepts. The students scored in the average range on the subtests. Overall, it was concluded that the students scored below national norms. In addition to the previously mentioned assessments, descriptive statistics were used to assess sex differences in social behaviors and emergent literacy. Boys showed a slightly higher mean level of classroom aggression, however not significant. Both boys and girls presented similar degree of prosocial behavior, solitary play, and negative affect. Then, correlation analyses were conducted to explore the relationship between observed social behaviors and emergent literacy skills. Students with higher prosocial behavior were associated with lower levels of solitary play. Higher levels of aggressive misbehavior were significantly associated with lower emergent literacy skills. Higher levels of solitary play were associated with children’s emergent literacy difficulties. Also, a greater occurrence of negative affect was related to poorer emergent literacy skills. Lastly,
multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate sex differences in social behaviors. Boys who displayed aggressive misbehavior also more frequently demonstrated difficulties in emergent literacy skills, but this was not the case for girls. In another analysis, it was noted that prosocial behavior predicted emergent literacy skills more strongly for boys than for girls. Particularly, higher prosocial behavior was related to higher emergent literacy skill scores for boys, but not for girls. Additional analysis showed that sex was not a factor when examining the relationships between solitary play and emergent literacy skills, nor was negative effect connected with emergent literacy skills.

Doctoroff et al. (2006) suggested that prosocial behavior with peers was related to emergent literacy skills however it was not as significant as expected. Aggression with peers, teachers, and objects was related to poor emergent literacy skills. Higher levels of solitary play and negative affect were associated with lower levels of emergent literacy. When talking about sex differences, it was suggested that boy’s prosocial behavior could attract teaching interactions therefore leading to more opportunities to gain skills; whereas, girls’ positive social interactions may possibly receive less attention. In addition, Doctoroff et al. concluded that increased levels of solitary play and negative effect were related to poor emergent literacy skills in both boys and girls. This may be due to social skills limiting language acquisition and difficulty with language discourages play with peers and increases frustration. Lastly, as Doctoroff et al (2006) had hypothesized, negative effect plays an important role in early learning. Students with increased negative affect had deficits in their emergent literacy skills.

Importance of Play

Another important factor that educators and parents need to encourage and instill is the importance of children learning how to play. Research has shown there is a link between play
and the development of cognitive and social skills. Play is connected to growth in memory, oral language, recognizing symbols, higher level of school adjustment, increased social development, and increased literacy skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2005a).

Through play, parents and educators can foster the learning of cognitive and social skills. In today’s society especially, play should be a major part of a child’s day. Today many children are entertained by television, video games, and computers and not enough time is spent exercising their minds, bodies, and emotions. Children are not engaging in the fundamentals of physical play. Their minds are not getting the opportunity to develop creative imaginations. When these children enter school, they are going to be delayed in many skills that play fosters (Bodrova & Leong, 2005a).

Though engaging in play, children learn how to build friendships and to develop empathy, compassion, and confidence (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2006a). These skills in turn aid in cognitive development. Children learn many other essential skills through engaging in play. In “What Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers Learn from Play,” Honig (2006) stated play:

- enhances bodily gracefulness
- promotes social skills
- sharpens cognitive and language skills
- teaches gender roles
- develops understanding of number and time concepts
- promotes spatial understanding
- prompts causality reasoning
- clarifies the world of pretend versus real
- enriches sensory and aesthetic appreciation
• extends attention span, persistence, and sense of mastery
• allows children to express emotions
• deepens a child’s sense of serenity and joy (p. 16-21)

Children need to be exposed to playful settings in which they are allow them to interact with other children and let their imaginations soar which leads to cognitive and social maturity.

Hanline, Milton, and Phelps (2008) explored the predictive relationship between preschoolers’ sociodramatic play and reading and mathematics abilities and the degree of growth in early elementary grades for children with and without disabilities. Three aspects of sociodramatic play were assessed which were symbolic agent, symbolic complexity, and symbolic substitution. There were 51 children that participated in this study, 22 of which were receiving special education services from their school district. Twenty-eight of the children were male, 23 were female, and the majority of them were white.

The researchers used quantitative methods with this study. The testing instruments that were used were the Test of Early Mathematics Ability (TEMA-2) and the Test of Early Reading Ability (TERA-2). In addition, the children were videotaped and for every minute of play observed, research assistants recorded the highest level of symbolic agent, the highest level of symbolic complexity, and the highest level of symbolic substitution observed. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) growth curve analysis was used to explore the predictive relationship between the three aspects of sociodramatic play and reading and mathematics abilities and growth rates. In addition, HLM growth curve analysis was used to determine if rates of growth and academic achievement differed between children with and without disabilities.

Hanline et al.’s (2008) results reveal that there were statistically significant differences between their predicted TERA scores of children with and without disabilities and this was also
true for TERA growth rates through ages 5-8. Results were similar with the TEMA scores where children without disabilities were predicted to have higher scores compared to students with disabilities. Symbolic substitution sociodramatic play had a consistent affect on growth rates in both TERA and TEMA for students with and without disabilities. Students with higher scores in symbolic substitution sociodramatic play also scored higher on predicted TERA and TEMA scores at age 8. However, symbolic agent play had a positive affect on math growth and level, but a negative effect on reading growth and level.

Hanline et al. (2008) concluded that the results from the HLM growth curve analysis revealed that children with disabilities had lower predicted reading and math skills at age 8. Also, in the early elementary years they progressed at a slower rate in reading abilities. Results also showed that symbolic complexity sociodramatic play was not significantly related to either math or reading abilities in the early elementary grades. On the other hand, symbolic substitution sociodramatic play was a powerful predictor of student’s academic abilities which were positively related to reading and math. Hanline et al. also suggested that representational play experiences are an important step toward using and processing written symbols. Play provides a transition from situational constraints that dominate actions and thoughts in children’s early childhood years to the symbolic thinking necessary to understand written symbols. The authors concluded that the child’s ability to think in a symbolic manner in preschool correlates positively to reading and math abilities and rate of growth, as both academic areas involve abstract thinking and the use of symbols. Furthermore, the results conclude a relationship between representational abilities in preschool and mathematics abilities in the early elementary years. Lastly, this study offers support for the importance representational play has on children, giving them the experiences needed to allow them to think symbolically, building the foundation
for later learning. Hanline et. al. excluded symbolic complexity from their discussion due to the fact that it did not have a statistically significant coefficient in either of the two growth curve hierarchical linear models and was also highly collinear with symbolic agent and symbolic substitution.

In conclusion, even though there has been much support in showing the benefits playful interactions or hands-on learning has on children’s early development, it is not significant. Research has shown that early playful interactions helps foster early development of children’s language, reading, and math abilities, as well as social skills. The next chapter of this literature review will suggest further research that needs to be conducted in order to see if continued playful learning can foster children’s development through the upper elementary grades.
CHAPTER III – RESULTS AND ANALYSIS RELATIVE TO PROBLEM

The purpose of this paper was to discover if children’s play affects their ability to perform academically and socially in school. The research reveals many connections between learning and play. Many, if not all, developmental aspects of learning are interconnected and they can all be developed through playful interactions or hands-on learning. However, even though research shows it is beneficial for students to learn in early childhood settings through playful interactions and hands-on learning, there is not significant evidence to prove that it is the only way to help students be successful. More research is needed to show how play can affect students in the long run. *What should be the role of play in elementary schools in the high stakes testing era?*

Many researchers have concluded that early learning through play fosters the development of cognitive skills, language skills, and positive behavioral skills. All these skills are necessary for progressing academically and socially in school and in the community (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Exposing children to different experiences and social settings also plays a huge role in children’s development. The more social settings they are exposed to the more opportunities they will have for language development and social development. Exposing children to these different experiences is linked to children’s ability to learn literacy (Bodrova, 2005a; Bodrova & Leong, 2005b; Rowe, 1998, Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). Furthermore, language skills connect with social skills and problem solving skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2005b; Burrington, 2006; Honig, 2006). All these skills need to continue to be nourished throughout their upper elementary school years.
The more students are put into playful situations the better they are going to get at speaking, interacting socially, and solving problems. Being a problem solver is such a vital skill children need to learn due to the fact that they will be doing it their whole lives. The earlier they start learning to problem solve the better off they will be as individuals. In addition, children’s verbal and nonverbal communication skills are going to grow while being engaged in these social interactions. Being exposed to a rich language environment also leads to phonological awareness (Doctoroff, 2006; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). These are all skills children need as they are growing up.

In conclusion, there has been overwhelming evidence that supports play as being an important role in the development of children’s academic skills and social skills. However, as it can be seen, the evidence has not been significant enough to prove that early interventions of playful interactions have a detrimental effect on children’s development in the upper elementary grades. This is why further research needs to be conducted in the upper elementary grades to see if playful, interactive, hands-on learning has an effect on the high-stakes testing era.
CHAPTER IV – RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, two recommendations are suggested for further research on the topic of play aiding in children’s academic and social development. The first recommendation is to educate parents. The second recommendation is to continue playful, interactive learning in the upper elementary grades. Furthermore, a research project is suggested to see how teaching through playful learning and interactive games in the upper elementary grades affects performance on high-stakes tests.

Recommendations

Research suggests that playful interactions in rich language social settings provide students with an advantage in school because it gives them a boost in cognitive and social development. My first recommendation is to educate parents. Provide parenting classes to parents to teach parents how to better teach their children before entering school. Not all parents know how to interact with their children. Parenting classes would provide a means of behavior management. In doing this, parents could teach their children appropriate social behaviors. Parenting classes would teach parents how to talk to their children to get them to be respectful listeners. Communication is a huge factor when it comes to all aspects of learning and can be done in many ways. Communication is language and students’ language development is essential when learning. By providing parents with parenting classes this will allow all students a chance at learning though play whether it be a home or in a school.

The second recommendation is to continue incorporating playful, interactive, hands-on learning in students’ daily routines in the older elementary grades. Students get a boost in cognitive and social development through learning through play in early childhood though about
second grade. So my second recommendation if for teachers to continue to let their students play. Teachers can teach in ways where the students think they are playing while they are learning. Kids think they are playing when they play games. Teachers need to turn their traditional teacher/textbook teaching into more hands-on, game-like activities. Engage students in new ways to keep learning playful, fun, and interactive.

**Areas for Further Research**

Research needs to be conducted to see what happens when teachers continue to teach through playful learning and interactive games. The research project I would conduct would show how teaching through playful learning and interactive games in the older elementary grades affects performance on high-stakes tests.

The study would be conducted over two years. The subjects selected the first year would be second graders at various schools. The students would be followed into third grade and their classes would remain the same. The reason I chose second and third graders is because I feel as though that is where the ball starts to get dropped and they are not learning through playful interactions as much as they did in Kindergarten and first grade. Then third grade would be the first year they take the standardized test.

The teachers involved in this study would be required to attend a class on Interactive Learning Strategies, such as the one offered by Bill Banks, to learn how to incorporate interactive games into their lessons. To help make this as consistent as possible, the teachers would have to use at least one interactive strategy when teaching every day for at least forty-five minutes. However they could use two or more strategies totaling at least forty-five minutes. Teachers will keep a log of the interactive learning games and/or strategies they used as well as
the total number of minutes the students were involved in them on a daily basis. To determine if play is a beneficial factor in students’ learning, the standardized test results will be compared to students who learned through traditional teacher/textbook learning.

Summary and Conclusion

Children learn at a very young age and that they do most of their learning through playful interactions. Learning through play presents significant gains in many areas such as language development, social skills, and academic skills. Research has shown that students learn by imitating story book characters through playful interactions. Book-related dramatic play played an important role in children’s literacy-learning process.

Learning through play also has a great impact on children’s social competence. Children learn through modeled behavior. Through playing they develop language skills, problem solving skills, creative thinking skills, and memory skills. Furthermore, being exposed to a highly interactive and rich language environment helps children with the development of phonological awareness. Children build friendships and develop empathy, compassion, and confidence through playing. Finally, the last study reviewed showed the importance play has on children, building the foundation for later learning. In conclusion, even though the studies examined did not find concluding evidence that play showed a significant difference in student’s ability to perform in the younger years, it would be very interesting to see if there would be a difference if the playful interactions continued through the older grades of school.
References


