

Northwestern College, Iowa

**NWCommons**

---

Master's Theses & Capstone Projects

Education

---

Fall 2019

## The Use of Learning Centers in the Kindergarten Classroom

Debra J. Hamand

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education\\_masters](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters)



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Early Childhood Education Commons](#)

---

The Use of Learning Centers in the Kindergarten Classroom

Debra J. Hamand

Northwestern College

A Literature Review Presented

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

December 14, 2019

Dr. Daniela Syed

Table of Contents

Abstract .....3

Introduction .....4

Review of the Literature .....6

Play-Based Learning in Kindergarten.....8

Government Influence of Play-Based Learning.....9

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP).....11

State Standards and Assessments..... 12

Benefits of Learning Centers.....15

Challenges of Learning Centers.....20

Teacher’s Role in Learning Centers.....21

Application.....25

Conclusion.....27

References .....29

### Abstract

This literature review discusses the necessity of learning centers in the kindergarten curriculum. The review first looks at pioneers in the field of education and how they feel children learn best. Learning centers is defined and tells why it should be in the kindergarten classroom and the benefits it offers. The review will discuss the legislation of why some people feel that play-based learning should be taken away from the school system and schools should only focus on academics. Today with high stakes testing and meeting state standards there is no time for learning centers. There are many challenges that teachers face when trying to implement learning centers and the role they have. Play-based learning is an important part of a kindergartners school day and being able to attend learning centers is the best way for young children to learn.

### The Use of Learning Centers in the Kindergarten Classroom

Every teacher's goal is to provide the best learning environment for their students. For the early childhood classroom, learning centers is the best developmentally appropriate practice (McLennan, 2011). Learning centers are designated areas where children enrich their learning. They work on academic skills by doing different activities during the school day that let them use items provided to create, explore, and to discover new ideas. Children choose which learning center they would like to participate in and use the materials that are provided for them (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Learning takes place when children are engaged and being active participates (McLennan, 2011). Learning centers lets children have hands-on opportunities.

There are many reasons that The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995) promotes the use of learning centers in the early childhood curriculum. Children learn how to work together cooperatively. They learn how to respect others and the materials in the learning center. They learn to problem solve by working with others. All children can learn since learning centers promote differential instruction (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). While children are at learning centers the teacher is able to observe and record the state standards that they are mastering.

In this paper the literature review will show how centers and play-based learning can be used in the kindergarten curriculum and still meet the state standards. Administrators and parents are very concerned on how children can learn in a play-centered environment. Academic goals can be reached for every child when they are motivated, engaged, and active participants during the school day. State standards can be meet by having children participate in learning centers. Educators are able to assess their student's progress not just by taking a test but also by

observing what the child is doing. They will be able to show others by using photographs that have been taken, recordings of a child, and the authentic work that the student completes.

There are many benefits and challenges when dealing with learning centers in education. Brain research shows how important it is for younger children to incorporate play into their daily routine especially at school (Stegelin, 2005). Many children no longer get any type of playtime since it is thought of as a waste of time (Bautista, Habib, Eng, & Bull, 2019). Basic learning games that were once played together as a family does not happen anymore. Children have missed out on learning opportunities that have mathematical and literacy skills. This is why children need to have these learning experiences in school while attending a learning center. Learning centers are a necessity in the kindergarten classroom (Bottini & Grossman, 2005).

### **Literature Review**

Froebel invented kindergarten so children could love learning. He wanted the kindergarten classroom to be a place where young children could explore and play while learning (Reifel, 2011). It is a place where children can sing, move, story tell, and play-act (McLennan, 2011). He wanted children to learn naturally not by rote (Hoskins & Smedley, 2019). It was his garden of children where kindergarten gets its name. The goal for young children was to be involved and knowledgeable about the world (Hoskins et al., 2019). Froebel had an assortment of materials that children could use to experiment and learn with while playing (Pyle, Prioretta, Poliszczuk, 2018). Children learn by doing by manipulating and playing with objects to see what happens (Pyle et al., 2018). Children learn to solve problems when they get to play and have hands-on opportunities (Reifel, 2011).

Froebel wanted teachers to be observers of these children to see what they were interested in learning (Reifel, 2011). In this study teachers would observe how children think and how they learn from just playing with many objects. By watching the children, teachers then could move them forward in their thinking. Watching children play and encouraging them to explore different materials in different academic learning centers lets teachers assess their abilities. Children's play comes from their imagination, it helps with creative thinking, and also helps infer the world around them (Hoskins & Smedley, 2019). Hoskins & Smedley (2019) stated that Froebel describes play as it is about the whole child, it includes the physical need for activity but also to have exploration, and to find joy in playful activities. Play should be child-led and child-initiated.

Montessori also agreed with the same style of teaching (Kinzer, Gerhardt, & Coca 2016; Bautista, Habib, Eng, & Bull, 2019). Children learn best when they are able to have choices in

their learning and participate in hands-on learning activities. Children's interests are what motivate them to learn. This is why the kindergarten curriculum should be child-centered. Children are excited to learn when they feel they are the ones in control (Bottini et al., 2005).

Piaget states that play is important for children's development and learning. He tells that play helps children with their physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). These areas are developed while students get the opportunity to free play during the school day. This is where the child is in control of their play and the teacher is not telling the child what to do. Play is important for children to incorporate new knowledge into their prior schemas (Bautista et al., 2019). Piaget encouraged learning through active experiences, where children can use concrete materials and peer interactions (Kinzer et al., 2016).

Vygotsky states that children should have guided play (Pyle et al., 2018). This is child-centered but adults take a more active role. While the child is playing the adult helps the child with their thinking. They encourage the child to expand their learning so they can reach the academic skills. In this study, Vygotsky tells that children need to have make-believe play during the school day to enhance their learning. In his type of play children have rules that they follow which helps children learn about self-regulation. Children have less make-believe play today than they have in the past (Pyle et al., 2018). They no longer use their imagination. Adults do not see the importance of play for young children and the meaning behind it (Scharer, 2017). Early childhood programs should be developmentally appropriate that will support a child's social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Pyle & Deluca, 2013). Children learn through their experiences by being child-centered and child-directed. Teachers need to scaffold and help enrich children while they play so they can meet the learning standards of the curriculum.



### **Play-Based Learning in Kindergarten**

Play-based learning is identified as a teaching approach that is playful, child-directed, that has some adult guidance and learning objectives for children to follow (Pyle & Danniels, 2017a). According to Pyle and Danniels (2017a), this type of learning in the early years shows that it is the most effective and has positively affected math and reading scores. When children are given learning materials within a play center they will become engaged with them.

According to Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels (2017b), cognitive development, social-emotional development, and development of self-regulation are beneficial for play in kindergarten.

Cognitive development includes having children being able to problem solve, use critical thinking skills, concept knowledge, and forming concepts with the materials used (Pyle et al., 2017b). In the study by Pyle et al. (2017b), children who have hands-on learning opportunities construct knowledge while participating in learning centers. Child-directed centers let students use their imagination to use objects to represent different things than what they were designed for to develop abstract thinking. Using blocks and other construction type of toys helps children with spatial relations, abstract thinking, and critical thinking skills.

Advantages of having play-based learning in the classroom helps with social-emotional development (Pyle et al., 2017b). Social-emotional development refers to cooperative skills, social behaviors, peer relationships, and social skills such as how to deal with rules while playing (Pyle et al., 2017b). Letting children have the opportunity to play while learning builds a positive and supportive classroom. Teachers who use play in the classroom have children who learn about cooperating, helping, sharing, and respecting others (Pyle et al., 2017b). When students are asked to retell a story they often will act it out. If a student makes a mistake or does something wrong while sharing the other students know how to respond since they have been in

a play-based classroom where they have built positive relations with their peers (Pyle et al., 2017b). In this study it was found that children felt confident of themselves in solving social problems without the help of a teacher (Pyle et al., 2017b). Children are willing to help each other to solve problems.

Self-regulation is another benefit in a play-based classroom (Pyle et al., 2017b). Self-regulation is defined as an internal mechanism that can control immediate impulses or being able to stop doing something when needed to reach a goal (Pyle et al., 2017b). It is being able to control one's actions. Self-regulation is needed so children can learn how to monitor their own behavior and be able to solve their own problems. In a play-based learning classroom children are in a safe environment where they are able to create and follow rules in games and activities that are provided for them (Pyle et al., 2017b).

### **Government Influence of Play-Based Learning**

Research shows that there has been a decrease of time that has been given to play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom and more time spent on academics (Lynch, 2015). In this study it stated three key reasons why American kindergarten teachers had to start focusing on academics instead of play in the classroom. The first reason was in the 1960s, when religious activities were taken out of the classroom. There were no academics or learning activities that took the place of the religious activities. The next reason is that standardized test scores of American students still dropped in the 1980s. Kindergarten students did not have anything academically added to the curriculum, and the Japanese educational system was doing better than the United States. This is when the National Commission of Excellence in Education released, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983 (Repko-Erwin, 2017). In the 1990s, time for playing in the classroom was taken away since politicians were concerned about the achievement gap between inner city

and suburban children and the middle-class Caucasian students and minorities, which led to No Child Left Behind Act (Lynch, 2015). This was to make schools be more accountable and make sure all students were achieving. These three reasons are why many kindergarten classrooms no longer have time for play-based learning. Academics must come first which left play out of the classroom.

In December of 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act replaced No Child Left Behind to bring a nation-wide movement to standardized instruction, raise test scores, and hold schools accountable for student learning (Repko-Erwin, 2017). In 2009, President Obama's Race to the Top initiative promoted states to use the Common Core Standards (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Academics have been pushed down to the kindergarten level because of the standards that need to be met (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

Since No Child Left Behind legislation, the kindergarten classrooms have completely changed (Cavanaugh, Clemence, Teale, Rule, & Montgomery, 2017; Repko-Erwin, 2017). According to Lynch (2015), classrooms that were full of manipulatives, dramatic play centers, and children being able to use their imagination are gone. Children are now being tested on literacy and mathematic skills instead of being child-centered which is what is developmentally appropriate. It was found that students who did not participate in play-based learning activities in kindergarten did not do as well as those who did on reading and mathematics (Cavanaugh et al., 2017).

Research has shown that play helps children develop socially, cognitively, are more creative, more verbal, successful at manipulating different symbol systems, and confident with experimenting with different experiences (Lynch, 2015). In kindergarten, teachers are using play-based learning activities to meet the standards while children are engaged in play (Reyes,

2010; Lynch, 2015). Lynch states (2015), play serves an important purpose for obtaining skills and experiences that will be needed in adulthood. One of the challenging jobs of teaching kindergarten is that children enter with all different ranges of knowledge (McDonald, 2018). Since children have different needs and different skill levels teachers need to use activities that will reach each child. Having a play-based learning environment is helpful since it includes every child (McDonald, 2018).

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)**

Developmentally appropriate practices were developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Walter & Lippard, 2017). This practice was developed to help reduce learning gaps, increase learning achievement, and to improve education for the early childhood classroom by looking at teacher knowledge and decision making as an important part to making school effective (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). A developmentally appropriate program gives support for the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Pyle & Deluca, 2013). Children who participate in developmentally appropriate programs have less stress behaviors, better social skills, and are more motivated than those who are not in a developmentally appropriate classroom (Walter & Lippard, 2017).

Developmentally appropriate practice has been outlined as teaching decisions made about each child looking at the interests, the age, and experiences (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

A developmentally appropriate curriculum is where the child is intrinsically motivated to explore and discover (Phillips & Sturm, 2013). In this study, it is stated that developmentally appropriate practices develop a positive character in young children and the skills needed to be successful in school and life. It also states that a DAP program is nurturing and a safe environment for children that promotes critical thinking skills, cooperative learning, and problem

solving skills. Developmentally appropriate programs use hands-on activities that are child-centered and use cooperative learning (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). One of the principles of child development that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) stated, is that play is valuable for developing self-regulation, promoting language, gaining knowledge, and being able to communicate with others. Active scaffolding of imaginative play is required in kindergarten to grow and sustain mature dramatic play that improves self-regulation, and social and emotional benefits (NAEYC, 2009).

Phillips (2013), states that a developmentally appropriate classroom needs to be inviting and welcoming. This can be done by having personal touches such as children's furniture, rugs, lamps, stuffed animals for children to use in the classroom while learning. Children should be able to explore the space by using the materials, be able to talk to others, laugh with one another, enjoy learning with others, and encouraging words should be used. Student's work should be displayed at their level along with other items that represent their family. All materials such as books, writing materials, dolls, and manipulatives should be in reachable places for children. Children should be able to have room to move around so they are able to sing and dance.

### **State Standards and Assessments**

In the kindergarten curriculum teachers are required to follow their state standards and benchmarks. Children are expected to meet these standards at the end of the school year no matter what their language ability is or maturity when the school year started (Costantino-Lane, 2019). Early childhood educators blame assessments for teachers not using developmental appropriate practices in the classroom (Hughes & Gullo, 2010). Teachers say they have to teach to the test by having students complete worksheets so they meet the standards. Kindergarten students are being taught and tested more on literacy and math skills than they do learning

through play or using their imagination (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). Teachers must follow the state standardized test word for word, which becomes difficult when a child does not understand the questions being asked. This is not how children learn best and it is not developmentally appropriate for kindergarten students (Hughes et al., 2010).

Early childhood educators have gone away from using learning centers when they know that this is developmentally appropriate. Children learn best when they are actively engaged with their peers discussing their experiences (Gullo et al., 2011). Learning this way lets the children explore together and discuss their findings. Their learning is more meaningful and gives them a strong foundation. Many administrators and parents say that their child is just playing and not learning. The teacher is not lecturing and instructing the child and they are not sitting at a desk doing worksheets. In many eyes, this is the way they think children learn so they are ready to take the standardized tests.

Teachers are pressured with all the standards and assessment scores that their students need to reach at the end of kindergarten (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). Test scores are posted in the newspaper and on the state website to show how the school and teachers are doing their job. Schools get a score on their school report showing how student's performed. If students do not do well on these mandatory tests the school may be classified as a school in need by the state.

The academic bar has been raised in kindergarten since many children attended prekindergarten; because of this, kindergarten is no longer a place for socialization and learning of basic skills (Gullo et al., 2011). Teacher-directed instruction is how young students are required to learn. Children sit at desks and are given tests and worksheets to complete to see what skills they have learned. Standardized testing has led to more teacher-directed instruction and less time for children to play (Wood, 2014). In kindergarten students are more focused on

academic skills so they can pass state tests. Students are not able to be creative in an art center nor are they able to explore and experiment with different manipulatives. They lose the interest in learning since it is not engaging for them. Research states that physically and mentally engaging activities that are play-based, are crucial for the development of a child (Stegelin, 2005).

Children who are entering kindergarten have had more formal schooling than in the past since preschool and prekindergarten programs but have had less time to explore, practice social skills, or learn how to build relationships with others (Graue, 2009). Kindergarten students are not prepared for the demanding challenges that face them (Graue, 2009). In this research it is stated, that many children lack appropriate social skills, lack basic language skills, and seem to just be interested in sitting in front of video games.

Since standards have become so important, the assessments that teachers use need to take part during a normal day of a kindergartener (Cress, 2004). In this study, teachers use checklists, observations, and interview the child for specific skills while they are visiting a learning center. Learning centers have been shown to help kindergarten teachers assess their students without disrupting the student's day or adding any extra work or any pressure for the student. The student is more relaxed and less anxious. Watching children during the day during their normal learning environment lets the child be more relaxed and they are able to show the teacher what they know. Kindergarten children seem to do their best when asked to perform tasks that are engaging and interesting to them. The tasks being asked to do are meaningful to them and have a purpose (Blessing, 2019).

Assessments do not just have to be a test taken (Cress, 2004). Students can create a portfolio where their work can be stored. Teachers can write anecdotal notes about the student

and write what they are saying or doing. Observing a student and keeping a checklist of the standards the child is mastering while they are at learning center is another tool that can be used. There are many ways to show what a student knows then just taking a test. This is just one way to show what a student knows. Standards and standardized tests have their place, but it is important to remember that it should be done in a developmentally appropriate way.

### **Benefits of Learning Centers**

Children who participate in learning centers during the school day have the opportunity to use hands-on activities to learn from (Reyes, 2010). They are able to manipulate blocks or other objects to help with math skills. They are able to play with clay or play dough to help with their fine motor development. They can dress-up so they can use pretend play to encourage language development and social skills. Play is an important part of every child's life (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). When kindergarten children go to school their work is play. Play is important since it helps develop language, cognition, social competence, and self-regulation (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). This is the way a child learns, it is the way a child can explore the world around them and be successful (Stegelin, 2005).

Invigorating play environments promotes higher levels of thought during childhood (Stegelin, 2005). In this study the brain research shows that when a child learns something new it needs to be repeated often so it is not forgotten. This is why learning centers are crucial for young students. The brain research findings state that physical, hands-on learning, eye-hand coordination activities, auditory and visually stimulating environments and consistent daily routines that are engaging for young students help them learn in the school setting.

Research shows that play is just one way to help children's learning (Reyes, 2010). This is why learning centers are a valuable part to any kindergarten curriculum. In this study it stated



that learning centers are developmentally appropriate for kindergarten students. Being an active participant in learning is important for children and by having appropriate activities for them helps them learn better than doing worksheets (Reyes, 2010). Children are encouraged to explore the learning center by taking part in the activities provided. Children can play and learn with their peers by using shapes to discuss math goals. They can examine plants growing and what a plant needs to survive for a science center. These activities might seem like the child is playing with the materials provided and not showing any type of learning. Learners that are more engaged with purposeful activities are planned and have fewer behavior problems (Reyes, 2010). Children's language, cognitive, social, and emotional development develops by being involved in learning centers (Anderson, Spainhower, Sharp, 2014).

Learning centers help children with problem solving skills (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995). When children are playing together they often get into conflicts. When a conflict happens each child has to decide what to do to solve the problem. The teacher is there to help give student's support about the situation but lets the students figure out what to do. Social skills develop while children play together. Children are responsible for solving their own problems. In a child-center environment, children feel they have more power and control (Bottini & Grossman, 2005). Children are independent and are able to take on responsibility for themselves. Research on play states that children learn to cooperate, take turns, and play by the rules (Stegelin, 2005).

Learning centers help children with symbol representation (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995). This is used so children can make objects stand for real things. When a child is playing in the dramatic play center they often have to use their imagination and have items represent different things. This is an important skill for children to

understand since letters have sounds that create words that represent an idea (Anderson et al., 2014).

Learning centers helps children with literacy skills (Stegelin, 2005). Teachers must nurture literacy development during the kindergarten year by giving children the most beneficial activities, such as play (Cavanaugh, Clemence, Teale, Rule, & Montgomery, 2017). Research showed a relationship with literacy skills such as decoding, oral reading, fluency, reading comprehension, and writing conventions just by giving children the opportunity for pretend play (Cavanaugh et al., 2017). In a reading center children are able to look at many different types of books and pretend to read them. They learn about book handling and print awareness skills. They study the pictures in the book and start to pretend read or make-up the story. This is the starting stage of reading. Since children enter school with many different learning experiences with literacy it is important that this center is full of a print rich environment. Literacy props such as stuffed animals and puppets are a useful tool when helping children with their verbal expression and social interactions. Children can listen to songs, poems, and nursery rhymes to help with phonemic awareness skills and to learn letter names and sounds.

Early childhood educators promote oral language development and literacy-rich environments by producing play-based opportunities for children since children learn best through play (Cavanaugh et al., 2017). Creating a literacy-rich play environment shows that literacy is found in every day use (Anderson et al., 2014). While children are playing they learn to stretch their language skills, build vocabulary, and understand how language works (Anderson et al., 2014).

The writing center is a place for children to explore writing. Since children are at all different stages their writing can be represented with scribbles, letterforms, and letters. Students

are encouraged to use developmental spelling when writing and to use print that is around the room (Anderson et al., 2014). While children are writing they can also be practicing their handwriting skills. Instead of doing workbook pages children can have an authentic purpose to write.

Children are working with print in the writing center but it can also be used in other centers that children play in (Anderson et al., 2014). When children are in the play center they can write a shopping list or write a letter to a friend. They can take orders for a restaurant they have created. They can fill out doctor notes for patients they have cared for in the doctor office they created. Writing can take place in other centers if the materials are provided (Reyes, 2010; Anderson et al., 2014). If they are in the math center they can create story problems for others to solve. In the block center a child can draw their creation for others to make. Children are using their imagination and using writing for an authentic purpose (Bautista et al., 2019).

Learning centers help children with math and science concepts (Hansel, 2015). Building blocks are just one manipulative that is important to have in a center. According to Hansel (2015), working with blocks helps children build a foundation in mathematics. Children are able to explore and understand shapes, measurement, geometry, and spatial relations. Children can count, sort, and classify blocks; they are able to compose and decompose with blocks; they can create patterns; they can see the difference between a two and three-dimensional shapes just by touching and playing with them. Working with blocks has many benefits. When children are building with blocks they are solving problems with spatial visualization and spatial orientation. They are exploring the blocks and creating structures that inspire engineers, architects, and artists. Having child-led explorations with blocks and then having the teacher share photos or drawings of different constructions will enhance children's knowledge of vocabulary (Pyle et al.,

2017b). Children have to also use problem-solving skills when creating their structures so the pieces will fit. Using blocks in learning centers also leads to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) activities. Children have a better understanding of abstract concepts since they have the opportunity to play. Teachers have included learning about number sense through games children play (Pyle et al., 2017b).

When teaching science, Hansel (2015) states, that kindergarten children can explore freely with blocks to learn science standards. Children can ask questions and develop hypotheses about the blocks and structure they are creating. They are able to test their hypotheses with their peers and discuss what happens. Children examine real materials to experiment with and investigate. Science learning centers have open-ended activities for the students to be interactive with and discover new ideas. It lets children be curious about learning.

Having an art center lets children use their imagination and be creative. They get to explore the materials to make something new. Children can express themselves by using different materials and different art supplies that are provided in the art center. Play helps with the development of creativity (Wood, 2014). Children can mix colors, express feelings by using colors, they practice their fine motor development by painting and other writing tools (NAEYC, 1995).

Learning centers help with differential learning (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). All students learn differently and are at different levels when they enter kindergarten. This is why differential learning is important. Differentiated instruction lets students use different materials, strategies, and experiences to guide their learning (Gullo et al., 2011). The activities planned in the centers are child-led and teacher-directed. The centers are put together so all children can explore and be successful at learning the concept being taught. Children are able to work at their learning

level and are also challenged by the activities in the center. Play lets children choose their level of challenge and stretches others in a low-stress situation (Gullo et al., 2011).

Learning centers promote decision-making skills (Bottini & Grossman, 2005). In this study, when the children start out to play they have to make the decision of where they want to go. They are constantly making independent choices of how they are going to use the materials in the center. They have to decide if they are going to create something with a partner or are they going to do something by themselves. Letting children have choices shows that the teacher is giving the child respect and trust (Bottini et al., 2005).

Learning centers help students with cooperation and teamwork (The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995). In this study it was shown that children have to learn to work together when they are in each center. They need to learn how to take turns and communicate with one another to help decide how they are going to play in the center. When it is time to pick up they have to use teamwork so the job gets done correctly. They have more opportunities for social interaction with their peers that leads to cooperative learning.

### **Challenges with Learning Centers**

The challenges that learning centers in kindergarten have are that not everyone is in favor of this type of learning (Graue, 2009). In this study it was stated that nearly one hundred percent of children attend some type of preschool program, which is why a play-based kindergarten is not needed. Parents feel that their children will be left behind if they are playing at school. They should be playing at home. The problem with this is that play does not happen at home.

The value of play is not important anymore (Graue, 2009). This was how kindergarten students learned many years ago when kindergarten was their first formal learning experience. Kindergarten was to expose children to new experiences and to make them feel comfortable

away from their homes (Graue, 2009). They were to learn how to be in a group, raise their hand, follow direction, and to listen to others.

Some teachers do not believe in play in the kindergarten classroom (Lynch, 2015). In this study a teacher stated that they thought kindergarten teachers were “lazy” for having play-based teaching methods. Teachers could spend valuable time with their students teaching them academic skills instead of having them play. At school there are trained professionals who know how to help children with reading and math, it should not be wasted with having children play. There are too many important skills to teach and not enough time to teach everything. Since kindergarten is in the elementary school, many teachers feel that they are looked down upon because their students are playing and the others are sitting in desks (Lynch, 2015). Teachers felt that they needed to follow the direction of everyone else. Another reason teachers no longer use learning centers is all the materials it requires (Lynch, 2015). The space that is needed for all the play materials and manipulatives takes most of the room in the classroom, so kindergarten teachers had to get rid of them so they would have room for academic needs.

Principals and superintendents are another reason why many teachers feel they cannot have play-based learning centers in their classroom (Lynch, 2015). Administrators feel that they are missing important instructional time and they don't have time to play in school (Graue, 2009). Many administrators have more experience with high school and do not understand what children need in the early childhood setting (Lynch, 2015). In this study teachers were disciplined if the children in their classroom were playing.

According to Lynch (2015), policy factors influence what happens in the classroom. Teachers have been told that if they want to have play in the classroom they will need to have a purpose. Teachers feel pressure that they need to concentrate on state standards, the curriculum,

and standardized tests that are mandatory so there is no time for play-based learning. No Child Left Behind is another reason why play has been removed from the kindergarten classroom.

During learning centers many teachers do not take advantage of the instructional opportunities they have with the children (Graue, 2009). Teachers often use this time to assess their students, get ready for the next day, or just let the children play with no guidance or support. According to Graue (2009), when teachers participate in play with their children they are able to do informal assessments but also scaffold their play. Teachers are able to develop better interactions and expand conversations.

### **Teachers Role in Learning Centers**

The teacher's role in a classroom with learning centers is very different than a regular classroom. Teachers need to have assessments, set-up the learning centers, have a plan plus activities, interact with the children, and be an arbitrator when problems arise (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992). Teachers are researchers, watching children how they play and how they can keep improving and making new learning centers (McDonald, 2018). The teacher must have an environment set up so that it is child-centered with engaging activities for children to participate in. According to Pattillo and Vaughan, (1992) each center needs to be self-learning since learning centers promote independence. Each center needs materials provided so children can work in small groups or independently. The teacher visits each center for short periods of time to work with the children and to further their learning. While the child is playing the teacher is observing, guiding them, and planning how they can tie in the standards that need to be taught (McDonald, 2018).

Since accountability is very important the teacher must have some type of assessment to show what the children are learning (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992). Most of the assessments are

done informally by observation by using checklists with the learning standard kindergarten students are required to know (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992; Blessing, 2019). The teacher can ask probing questions to see what each child knows to see what the child's skill level is (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992). They can collect pieces of their work or take pictures of what they have created to put in a child's portfolio. Assessments are valuable pieces of information since it will determine what skills children know and what they still need to work on (Blessing, 2019). This also helps when planning for new center activities (Pattillo et al., 1992).

Pattillo and Vaughan (1992) states, when a teacher plans for a learning center they first need to think about the goals and standards they want the children to achieve (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992). Each activity in the center is focused on this goal and what is being taught in the classroom. Materials are put into the center for children to use so the center will be engaging. The activity must be something that children can do independently and many learning centers have anchor charts for students to follow (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992).

Pattillo & Vaughan (1992), discuss a variety of ways a teacher interacts with the children at a learning center. The teacher can observe the child and watch what they are doing. Teachers can also use nondirective statements while visiting a center. This is where the teacher will talk about what the child is doing but it does not need any response back from the child. Teachers will often use two different types of questions when working with children at a center. They will either ask open-ended or closed-ended questions. The teacher may also use directive statements to give directions to children at the center. The last way is physical intervention. This is where the teacher may have to model what is expected at the center such as how to play a game or how to work in a center.



When children attend a learning center problems often arise. The teacher's role is to be an arbitrator where they assist children in handling conflicts (Pattillo & Vaughan, 1992). The teacher is not there to solve the problem but to encourage and guide them to find a resolution. Children need to be able to discuss their feelings and tell what is bothering them. This is one of the main reasons to have learning centers, it lets children have the responsibility and independence. It teaches them on how to get along with others.

### **Application**

Learning centers and play-based learning is valuable to the kindergarten curriculum. Play is part of children's life and it is critical to their development (Stegelin, 2005). The research shows that play is important for children's physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Pyle et al., 2018). Many people feel that play takes away from learning and that play should not be in the classroom, it takes away from academic learning (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Every early childhood educator needs to do what they think is best for their students.

As a kindergarten teacher I see first hand how valuable learning centers can be in the kindergarten curriculum. I can see the joy and excitement that the children have when they can explore and create something. They are excited about coming to school and eager to learn. The kindergarten curriculum needs to be engaging so children will want to learn and be successful. They use their prior knowledge when starting but as they learn and develop during the year they continue to grow to learn new skills.

I show administration, other teachers, parents/caregiver, and anyone who would question why I use learning centers in my classroom and how each child is meeting the kindergarten standards. I have authentic assessments that are meaningful and show exactly what their child knows. I am able to communicate what their child needs to improve their skills and where their child is heading for the future.

Using developmentally appropriate practices in my classroom is another reason why I have chosen to use learning centers in my classroom. Students are engaged at all times and if they are not I know that I need to see what I have to change in the center. When children need to learn the letters of the alphabet and the sounds some teachers would have them learn them by flashcards. I like to incorporate music and dance to try to meet all learning styles. Children want

to learn because it is presented to them in a fun way. Children take ownership of their own learning when they are given choices (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Children want to learn and pay more attention if they make the choices.

Another reason why I use centers is that it promotes independence. Children are able to solve their own problems and work with each in a cooperative manner. This does take teaching, which is done, at the beginning of school year. I am there to assist them if needed, but they have been given the encouragement and steps to solving problems with others that they feel confident in themselves to do this.

Learning centers enriches all academic areas. Having my students attend any learning center I know that they will be working on the state standards that are required since I have planned my centers to work this way. Doing this has helped the students who didn't catch it the first time that is was taught but also enriches those who need a challenge. Students are able to work on the same topic but at different levels.

### **Conclusion**

From the evidence provided, it is in the best interest for kindergarten children to keep learning centers in the kindergarten curriculum. It is using best practices by being developmentally appropriate. Learning centers promote play-based learning that is student-centered and promotes independence. It helps with language, social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Kindergarten should be seen as a foundation where children are able to take prior knowledge, their needs and interests to expand their learning (Graue, 2009).

There are many reasons why learning centers are used in the kindergarten curriculum. Children are learning academics, developing social skills, and are active learners. Play-based learning is engaging and gets children excited, if learning is not then it is a waste of time (Graue, 2009). Children are able to explore and investigate the activities in each center to learn new skills and concepts at their pace in a stress-free environment. When children attend learning centers classroom management is not a problem since children are being active learners.

Many children no longer get play-time in the school setting since it is felt that it is a waste of time especially when state standards need to be met. Teachers who use learning centers meet the standards while children are engaged with hands-on activities instead of worksheets. It is believed that children who do not get to play will not develop skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ziegelstein, 2018). Play engages all students and motivates them to learn.

Play is crucial to children's development and should be imperative to a kindergartener's school day. More structured learning happens in kindergarten classrooms when children are given the opportunity to attend learning centers (Hope-Southcott, 2013). Children are engaged, motivated, and curious which is what play-based learning is about. Children are learning and

having fun. They are working together with their peers or working independently. They get to decide, they have the choice.

Developmentally appropriate practices should be used in the kindergarten classroom to assist with children's learning. Learning centers are student-centered that gives children hands-on experiences for them to explore and investigate. Children can learn in a variety of ways while attending a learning center and at their own pace.

Early childhood educators need to be advocates when addressing play-based learning. Kindergarten children depend on this so administrators and principals do not take learning centers away. Play-based learning in kindergarten is developmentally appropriate practice and more people need to understand how young children learn. It is not done with worksheets or tests but by being curious about the world around them.

## References

- Anderson, G. T., Spainhower, A. R., & Sharp, A. C. (2014). "Where do the bears go?" the value of child-directed play. *Young Children, 69*(2), 8-14.
- Bautista, A., Habib, M., Eng, A., & Bull, R. (2019). Purposeful play during learning centre time: From curriculum to practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 51*(5), 715-736.  
doi:10.1080/00220272.2019.1611928
- Bottini, M., & Grossman, S. (2005). Center-based teaching and children's learning: The effects of learning centers on young children's growth and development. *Childhood Education, 81*(5), 274-277.
- Blessing, A. D. (2019). Assessment in kindergarten: Meeting children where they are. *Young Children, 74*(3), 6-12.
- Cavanaugh, D. M., Clemence, K. J., Teale, M. M., Rule, A. C., & Montgomery, S. E. (2017). Kindergarten scores, storytelling, executive function, and motivation improved through literacy-rich guided play. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 45*(6), 831-843.
- Costantino-Lane, T. (2019). Kindergarten then and now: Perceptions of ten long term teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 47*(5), 585-595.
- Cress, S. W. (2004). Assessing standards in the real kindergarten classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 32*(2), 95-99. doi:10.1007/s10643-004-1075-7
- Graue, E. (2009, November). Reimagining kindergarten: Restoring a developmental approach when accountability demands are pushing formal instruction on the youngest learners. *School Administrator, 66*(10).
- Gullo, D. F., & Hughes, K. (2011). Reclaiming kindergarten: Part 1. questions about theory and practice. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 38*(5), 323-328.

- Kinzer, C., Gerhardt, K. & Coca, N. (2016). Building a case for blocks as kindergarten mathematics learning tools. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 44(4), 389-402.  
doi:10.1007/s10643-015-0717-2
- Lynch, M. (2015). More play, please: The perspective of kindergarten teachers on play in the classroom. *American Journal of Play*, 7(3) 347-370.
- Hansel, R. R. (2015). Bringing blocks back to the kindergarten classroom. *Young Children*, 70(1), 44-51.
- Hope-Southcott, L. (2013). The use of play and inquiry in a kindergarten drama centre: A teacher's critical reflection. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 38(1), 39-46.  
doi:10.18357/jcs.v38i1.15437
- Hoskins, K., & Smedley, S. (2019). Protecting and extending Froebelian principles in practice: Exploring the importance of learning through play. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17(2), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X18809114>
- Hughes, K., & Gullo, D. (2010). Joyful learning and assessment in kindergarten. *Young Children*, 65(3), 57-59.
- McDonald, P. (2018). Observing, planning, guiding: How an intentional teacher meets standards through play. *Young Children*, 73(1), 31-35.
- McLennan, D. P. (2011). Meeting standards in the changing landscape of today's kindergarten. *Young Children*, 66(4), 106-111.
- Pattillo, J. & Vaughan, E. (1992). *Learning centers for child-centered classrooms*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED344675.pdf>

- Phillips, E. C., & Sturm, B. W. (2013). Do picture books about starting kindergarten portray the kindergarten experience in developmentally appropriate ways? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 41(6), 465-475.
- Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2017a). A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play. *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), 274-289.
- Pyle, A., & DeLuca, C. (2013). Assessment in the kindergarten classroom: An empirical study of teachers' assessment approaches. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 41(5), 373-380.
- Pyle, A., DeLuca, C., & Danniels, E. (2017b). A scoping review of research on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education. *Review of Education*, 5(3), 311-351.
- Pyle, A., Prioletta, J., & Poliszczuk, D. (2018). The play-literacy interface in full-day kindergarten classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(1), 117-127.
- Reifel, S. (2011). Observation and early childhood teaching evolving fundamentals. *Young Children*, 66(2), 62-65.
- Repko-Erwin, M. E. (2017). Was kindergarten left behind? Examining US kindergarten as the new first grade in the wake of no child left behind. *Global Education Review*, 4(2), 58-74.
- Reyes, C. L. (2010). A teacher's case for learning center extensions in kindergarten. *Young Children*, 65(5), 94-98.
- Scharer, J. H. (2017). Supporting young Children's learning in a dramatic play environment. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 42(3), 62-69.
- Stegelin, D. (2005). Making the case for play policy: Research-based reasons to support play-based environments. *Young Children*, 60(2), 76-85.



- The National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/PSDAP.pdf>
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1995). *From basics of developmentally appropriate practice: An introduction for teachers of kindergarteners*. Retrieved from <http://docplayer.net/30033724-Learning-center-goals-observation-and-assessment.html>
- Walter, M. C., & Lippard, C. N. (2017). Head start teachers across a decade: Beliefs, characteristics, and time spent on academics. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45(5), 693-702.
- Wood, L. D. (2014). Viewpoint holding on to play: Reflecting on experiences as a playful K-3 teacher. *Young Children*, 69(2), 48-56.
- Ziegelstein, M. (2018, September). A joyful journey to play in K. *The Education Digest*, 84, 50-54.