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Play in Early Childhood

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

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Abstract

This literature review looks at play in early childhood education and why play is important for early learners. The review looks at the history of play and the benefits that play has on brain development, as well as defining play. Adults play an important role in play, as does the early childhood learning environment. Early learners develop their critical thinking skills and their social and emotional skills through play. The curriculum that is offered to early learners should revolve around play but should ensure that they are being provided the opportunity to learn about the outdoors, math, reading, and all other areas of learning. Children should be able to meet benchmarks on assessments through play in the early childhood environment. Play is such an important part of a child's early years, all persons that are involved in a child's life should be able to understand through research why play is important.

Play in Early Childhood

Play in early childhood has been around for many years. Play is an important part of any early childhood program, while the benefits of play are both physical and emotional for early learners. Social and emotional skills need to be taught to students in an early childhood setting. In order for a student to succeed in academics, they need to have social and emotional skills. Play allows early learners to become critical thinkers, and helps early learners to develop social and emotional skills. While playing children develop imagination and creativity, social development, and skill development (Clements & Fiorentino, 2004). All areas of academic learning can and should be incorporated into play for early learners. The environment, whether indoors or outdoors, is key to providing early learners with opportunities for play. Adults play a critical role in facilitating play in the early childhood setting. Adults are able to guide early learners in the areas that they need work on and help them to develop in these areas. By doing this, the adults are allowing for the students to learn and grow through play. There are research findings that report the benefits of play in early learners and what should be done to promote play in early childhood settings. A quality early childhood program will have many opportunities for students to play during the day, allowing for them to grow both socially and academically.

This paper conducts a literature review of the effects of play on early education. First, the paper provides a brief summary of the history of play, the definition of play, and the importance of brain development. . The paper then analyzes the adult's role during play as well as the early learning environment. The next section of the literature review involves investigating play within the early childhood students and their skills. Finally, the paper

examines the relationship between play and academics before summing up with play and assessment.

Literature Review

Throughout history, there have been many important historians that have shaped the way early childhood is today. Beginning historians such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau played an important role in shaping the way play is looked at today. He believed that a child's development a child's education should support their happiness, and it is important to encourage children to develop his or her own strengths (Morrison, 2007). All of these things have an impact on today early childhood education. The early childhood environment plays an important role in early childhood education and Robert Owen believed that children learn about themselves and the world through their environment and in today's education, this contributes to the idea that the early childhood environment plays a critical role in a child's development (Morrison, 2007). Research shows us that Jean Piaget developed the three stages of intellectual development that are still used today in early childhood environments (Morrison, 2007). Today Jean Piaget's impact on education is the environment plays a critical role in a child's education. Current early childhood curriculum such as The Creative Curriculum supports that children learn best through experiences and that education should be based on child readiness similar to what Piaget believed, children learn best through experiences and that education should be based on child readiness (Morrison, 2007). A child's social environment is essential for his or her learning. Erik Erickson believed that social and emotional development is an important part of curriculum (Morrison, 2007). Children need to have an early childhood environment that is rich in providing them with social and emotional learning skills to promote life skills that are needed to be a successful lifelong learner.

Defining Play

According to *Webster's Desk Dictionary of the English Language*, the word play has 34 different meanings. In terms of young children and play, the following definitions from Webster's are useful:

- light, brisk, or changing movement (e.g., to pretend you're a butterfly)
- to act or imitate the part of a person or character (e.g., to play house)
- to employ a piece of equipment (e.g., to play blocks)
- exercise or activity for amusement or recreation (e.g., to play tag)
- fun or jest, as opposed to seriousness (e.g., to play peek-a-boo or sing a silly song)
- the action of a game (e.g., to play duck-duck-goose)

The Creative Curriculum focuses on four types of play in early childhood. These four types of play are functional play, constructive play, dramatic or pretend play, and games with rules. It is essential for young children to be provided opportunities for play. When young children are playing, they should be happy and have much joy. According to *Young Children Journal*, play is an instructional tool for learning. Providing children with the opportunities to play will allow them to learn from one another, expand on their current knowledge, and assist them in mastering skills that are needed for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning skills are necessary for students to become successful adults later in life. Play in early childhood has so many effects on children that last a lifetime.

Benefits of Play

There are many benefits to play in early childhood education. There was a case study done on children and young play. The study looked at if the amount of play in preschool and kindergarten settings was appropriate to meet the developmental needs of young learners including cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. Two schools participated in the study. The results of the study were that that School A offered both outdoor and free play totaling a little under three hours of play a day. School B offered less than a half an hour of outdoor play. Based on the results of this case study, the findings are that more play be included in the daily schedule of both schools (Myers, 2012). Other benefits of play include stimulating the brain, which enhances early development, learning and memory, and play sparks creative thinking. Play also help with language learning, visual and spatial skills. Pretend play can facilitate impulse control and emotional regulation, social competence, and healthy children. Play can also teach life lessons and strengthen relationships with children and adults as well as children and peers (9 benefits of play, 2018). Play also stimulates your child's imagination and creativity. Studies have shown that kids who are encouraged to use their imagination are more creative in their adult life (Hartwell-Walker, 2018). Encouraging children to play and helping to facilitate their play has long lasting effects on a child's life. Teachers and early education providers play an important role in providing children with play opportunities so that children will benefit from play.

Although play is fundamental for people of all ages (even grownups play every now and then), it is particularly significant and essential for young children. Truly speaking, play is their work, which provides and incredible quantity of energy and exercise (Clements & Fiorentino, 2004). There are a minimum of three ways within which play is crucial for young children. First, it allows for ability development in young children. Second, it allows for social

development. Lastly, it allows for imagination, creativity, and power. Learning occurs altogether throughout the areas of development as children play.

Playing with different children is crucial for the development of social skills. Originally, children play with children their same age, but with time, they tend to start engaging with individuals of different ages. It is through such activities that they learn the manner in which to work together with others that engagement could get them their much-desired toys, touch, and feel (Clements & Fiorentino, 2004). Equally, they could get that desired friend with a comparable passion, likes, and preferences. It has been proven from first time accounts that childhood friendships can last the test of time. Shared friendship is a fundamental cornerstone for learning, growth, and development.

Play is that channel within which imagination, creativity, and power are often cultivated and demonstrated. The child who pretends to be for example, a cowboy, a fairy, a mother, or a soldier is showing some data of these particular roles and is acting through his or her own perceptions regarding all that they associate with (Frost, 2010). So the child who is playing make believe with toys are portraying his or her desires of what he or she feels about a particular topic. By providing children with opportunities to play with a variety of materials during the day parents and teachers alike are encouraging creativity and imagination for early learners which is key for them to be successful both socially and academically. ,

Brain Development

A growing body of science is continuously discovering the relationships between play in children and their development in various areas, including language, math, and spatial skills,

executive functions, scientific thinking, and emotional and social development (Weisberg et al., 2016). One of the reasons that make play so vital is that it encompasses the clear-cut contexts that ease the learning process. A combined research field known as the science of learning identifies four critical ingredients for successful learning, first, learning occurs most optimally when children are active mentally (not passive); second when they are engaged (free from distraction); third socially interactive (with adults and peers), and fostering meaningful connections in their lives (Weisburg, Zosh, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2013). These features exhibit the elements that a classroom of children in an early education setting must incorporate for successful outcomes.

In pursuit of this, play impacts significantly on early brain development. Seventy-Five percent of the brain develops after a baby is born. Scientists approximate that children from newborn age up to 17 years old spend between three percent and 20 percent of their day playing (Christy et al., 2016). Of course, this is with the exclusion of children who are severely malnourished, disabled, or deprived. Play has so many benefits to the development of the brain among children. Play develops the brain's executive function. Executive function refers to the mental skills that allow us to manage time and attention, to plan and organize, to remember details, and to decide what is and is not appropriate to say and do in a given situation (Hartwell-Walker, 2018). Children who have a well-developed executive function do well in school, get along well with others, and make good decisions. If children are not provided with opportunities to play, it in turn affects how the neurons in their brain are developing, which in turn affects their day-to-day functions, which will affect their entire life. Children need to be given opportunities to play so that they can develop these neurons. It is a ripple effect on a child and the rest of their life if they are not given a variety of opportunities for play.

It is believed that play shapes the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased “flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life” (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9). Young children’s play allows them to explore, identify, negotiate, take risks and create meaning. Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behavior, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). As children begin to grow and become young adults, the brain becomes less likely to change; this decreases the opportunities for growth and development in the brain. For example, by the first year, the parts of the brain that differentiate sound are becoming specialized to the language the baby has been exposed to; at the same time, the brain is already starting to lose the ability to recognize different sounds found in other languages. Although the “windows” for language learning and other skills remain open, these brain circuits become increasingly difficult to alter over time. Early plasticity means it is easier and more effective to influence a baby’s developing brain architecture than to rewire parts of its circuitry in the adult years (Center on the Developing Child, 2007).

Scientists have discovered critical proof that playful behavior has a very positive and powerful effect on the human brain (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Kittredge, 2016). This proof is so powerful that the effects to which children play does not affect her capacity to learn. In 1964, scholars from the University led by Dr. Marion Diamond published a convincing paper regarding brain growth among rats. This was a lengthy experiment based on brain development, in which the rats were raised right from birth to adulthood in two dissimilar

circumstances: one of solitary, boring confinement, and the other of toy-filled exciting colonies (Weisberg et al., year). When the investigators examined their brains, they established very significant facts that started a new movement regarding the manner in which educators and parents approach early childhood. The rats were impoverished that were raised and resided in solitary confinement and possessed thinner and smaller cerebral cortexes than the rats that were raised in the “enriching” environments with many toys and tunnels to explore. Subsequent follow up research indicated that the results were indeed reflective of the situations. The rats that were permitted to play (in stimulating conditions) possessed larger brains and were literally smarter. They were quicker to learn cause and effect and were quicker in finding their way out of mazes and tunnels.

However, even if it is not ethical to carry out the same kind of research on humans, animal scientists have confirmed that other research supports this finding (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Kittredge, 2016). Many animals participate in social play, which makes a lot of sense. For example, animals such as dogs, tigers, bears, cats, and some birds will play. Magpies snap at one another and bring each other to the ground playfully like two puppies wrestling and nipping. Scientists tend to think that this form of wrestling among young animals was preparation and practice for hunting skills. However, research over the past decade has demonstrated otherwise. For example, grown cats do not have much trouble searching for and killing mice even after deprivation of play earlier as kittens. This leads to the question: why do young animals play? Scientists have concluded that play is intrinsic and helps develop the brain socially. The effect of play is to bring out pro-social brains that know how to engage with others of the same or dissimilar kind in positive ways (Wang & Aamoldt, 2012). Play impacts the brain through making the prefrontal cortex larger and faster. This experience alters the neurons’

connections at the brains' front end. Lack or avoidance of play experience, the neurons do not change (Wang & Aamodt, 2012). This is significant due to the reality that the prefrontal cortex represents the brains executive control point. This is where the brain can regulate emotions, solve problems, and make plans. Because of this, scientist have concluded healthy and possibly brilliant brain development. However, researchers suggest that not any form of play will be sufficient. To optimize early brain development, children require "free Play" (Wang & Aamodt, 2012). This is unrestricted play that has no rulebooks, no referees, and no umpires. By engaging in impulsive and unrestrained play, the child's brain starts to form new circuits inside the prefrontal cortex to them it to navigate elaborate social interactions. Here, the keyword is "free, unstructured play." It is impossible to attain this through guided play where early educators may impose rules time when children play structured games of basketball or football. The reason is that, for play to bring the desired impact on the brain development as discussed, the play must really be playful.

Adult's role in Play and Instruction

Adults play an important role in early childhood play. There three roles that adults can play in child's play as identified by Michigan State University Extension. The first role is planning for play. Structure the environment based on the children's strengths and abilities, but also expand on the children's current knowledge to allow for an increase in this knowledge. Provide children with a variety of choices. The second role that adults have is to support children during play. As the adult, it is important to support the child's play and talk about play, validate the child's efforts during play, add to the child's play by actively participating in play with the child. Problems during play can be prevented by intervening if necessary, it is

important to remember that children need opportunities for problem solving during play, and finally build children up during play by assisting them in engaging in play if they need guidance as well as making them feel comfortable. Lastly, it is important for adults to review play by checking in with children, observing the space, thinking critically, and making plans for the future. Children need adults to guide them and teach them how to play and what is expect at a young age.

The Creative Curriculum has developed what they call the Teacher's role. The teacher's role in The Creative Curriculum is to observe children, guide children's learning, and assess children learning. There are many parts to each one of these roles. In the first role of observing children teachers need to know how, when, and what to observe. It is important that the teacher remains objective while doing his or her observations. Part of the Creative Curriculum is the Developmental Continuum and during observations, this can be used. When a teacher is guiding children's learning, they need to remember that not all children learn or play the same way and so there must be a range of teaching approaches that are used while facilitating children's play. With this in mind, adaptations may need to occur to include all children in play. As a teacher, facilitating student learning while observing them, will work in small groups of students during certain periods of the day. In an early childhood setting, there are interest areas throughout the classroom, another role for the teacher or adult is to promote learning through these interest areas, explore content in the interest areas, and integrate student learning through classroom studies. The last role that the Creative Curriculum talks about is assessing children's learning by collecting facts, analyzing and evaluating the collected facts, and using what you have learned to plan for future lessons.

It is important to understand how adults can play a successful role in facilitating children's play and planning activities for play. According to the Book active learning for Fives. There are three things that adults can do to plan for activities. The first is to plan and set up centers or interest areas that children will enjoy. The second it to find out what interests the children have that you are working with. The last is what skill level the children have that you are working with so you are aware not only of what types of activities to provide, but what level of activities need to be provided for these early learners (Cryer, Harms, & Bourland, 1996). Adults have such an important role in the early child hood years of children. It is imperative that they understand what they can do to make these years the best for young learners. The more opportunities for play that are given to children at a young age will have a longer lasting effect on them and their brain development. Teachers and other adults play an important role in a child's life and what they do during play in an early childhood setting.

Play and the early childhood environment

The early childhood environment is an important factor in play. Given that the majority of philosophies encourage children's' healthy development, then it make sense that the early childhood environment needs to be considered. An early childhood space reflects many things: it is a protected and safe haven where the children and safeguarded from external and internal elements and are supervised quite easily (Willis, Weiser, & Kirkwood, 2014). In their roles, adults have control over their child's play environment. They guarantee that they have fun and set a suitable environment for their children. Adults have to first plan for play (Zurek & Torquati, 2014). Planning for child's play is an important part of ensuring that the play environment is safe. When planning, teachers, parents, and other caregivers have to pay

attention to space and structure (Holmes, 2011). Regardless of whether it is indoors or outdoors, the structured environment has to consider the child's abilities, need and strengths. This will not control playing a bad way, but enhance the child to become autonomous and successful in a protected space. The parents or teachers can build and extend the child's existing knowledge or comprehension by offering materials or opportunities that can spur them on. In addition, they can offer choices with the early environment. By offering choices, the freedom to select can empower children to direct their own learning experiences founded on their own abilities and interests.

Another factor that emerges in early childhood environment is supporting play. Should parents and teacher not only create an environment that is safe for children's play, but also support the play activities through various ways (Ernst, 2014). First, it is critical to set up the environment and mood by talking about play and what it entails. Adults can get involved in their children's play environment by asking them what they prefer, which will make them invest in the appropriate materials to meet the needs. Secondly, they can validate their children's efforts while structuring the environment. Getting involved in play upon invitation by the child can show the kids that play is fun and entertaining. This demonstrates to them that their efforts have value and are significant. The proximity and presence communicate a lot to young ones during early development.

However, according to Hakkarainen, Bredikyte, and Jakkula (2013), natural outdoor environments have been undermined in recent years as suitable spaces for early childhood play. In research on "learnsapes" by Ernst (2014), it was established that the selective utilization of outdoor educational settings augmented by multifaceted barriers and motivation stimulated

growth and development among young learners. When teachers comprehend natural settings, they are able to improve their professional development efforts to devise the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are relevant towards eliminating these barriers. For instance, some educators perceived parks as the most enabling outdoor setting for accomplishing learning outcomes and lean towards utilizing maintained outdoor environments as opposed to the natural outdoor contexts (Ernst, 2014). Similarly, teachers set up environments for play according to the intended learning objectives. For example, a teacher who has the desire to instruct children regarding nature will more than likely pick the natural outdoor environment for play and learning. A well-designed classroom environments that promotes play supports responsive caregiving, fosters independence and feelings of competence in young children, encourages staff efficiency, promotes children's engagement, decreases challenging behaviors, facilitates appropriate social interactions among children, and provides structure and predictability is the foundation for an environment that is child friendly and allows for play.

Play and Student Skill

Students in early childhood setting develop diverse skills through play. Play describes a significant component of early childhood programs as it allows the students in these programs the opportunities to express their feelings and ideas, symbolize and gauge their knowledge of the rest of the world, and obtain effective support for pre-academic and academic learning (Lechmann, Cunningham, & Lasley, 2016.) Through play activities, children can internalize and synthesize information they have picked. For example, after completing a lesson, permitting children to play will assist them to apply the information into the real world in which they live. In the event that it is possible to incorporate play into the lesson, then it is essential to apply it

after teaching the content to aid the children in internalizing the information they have just been taught.

Subsequently, children will learn to acquire and master skills dependent to their abilities, needs, and capacity. When children play, they integrate everything in their knowledge regarding domains (Gordon, 2017). According to child development and education theorist, Vygotsky, play centered on the child's development is essential. One of the theories that he pushed was that play improved a child's literacy and language development (Bodrova & Lelong, 2016). Play enhances children's cultural development and experiences through availing those cultural instruments with include language development. Additionally, he argued that human beings obtain cultural instruments that help expand them developmentally. Young children use speech during play to regulate and control their behavior, ultimately transforming the private speech into a mechanism of self-regulation by internal thought (Ernst, 2014). Play enhances children's skills in different areas through promoting problem solving, enhancing cognitive, social, emotional, creativity, and imagination elements. The child can deepen his or her understanding through enacting theories taught in play. Thus, the child is able to internalize the knowledge obtained. In this way, they develop skills that endure throughout their lives.

Social and Emotional Skills

From the beginning of this paper there has been a specific path regarding the benefits of play among early childhood learners, with one of the most significant being the importance of the early learners' social and emotional skills. Being a social being, humans tend to interact with each other and with other animals (Cohn, 2010). Through play, children get to interact with each other and the rest of the world, where they start being part of the community. An early learner's

development can be significantly affected by interactions with consistent and loving caregivers and teachers as they engage with children while playing. When adults join their children in playing, they unlock a social and emotional world that children will grow with for the rest of their lives. The adults get to view the world from a child's vantage points while the children appreciate the accompanying emotions of pain, joy, and adventure, as presented to them by the wider society. Children who play with other people in an environment that promotes empathy will definitely develop the character of being empathetic towards others. In addition, other traits such as discipline, love, compassion, reasoning, and empathy should be included during play. Doing this reiterates the importance of preparing the early childhood learning environment so it is appropriate for the early learners to play and have success.

Play and critical thinking skills

Plans and opportunities for play offer children the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills. Depending on the particular play adopted and its theme, children can learn critical thinking aspects such as asking open-ended questions, developing their own hypothesis regarding diverse situations and choosing when to intervene in issues requiring deliberation (Kamarulzaman, 2015). Children can utilize play to actively develop knowledge, meet social/emotional needs, and obtain skills. In a congruent study undertaken by Jones and Reynolds (2011), it was established that young children are able to learn the most essential things devoid of instruction through constructing knowledge by themselves based on the manner in which they interact with other children and the physical world. The only way in which they can accomplish this is through play.

Play tends to encourage support among young children and promote higher confidence levels. When children engage, for example, in repetitive play, they develop decision making skills (Cohn, 2010). When a child does not get the desired result from a playing activity through the joy and intimacy of friendship that he or she explores with other children, he or she will strive to change the outcome in subsequent playing sessions through making more informed decisions. Play contributes to the feelings of emerging self-identity, self-directedness, self-confidence, and competence. With time, the child is able to become competent in thinking through issues prior to making any committal decisions. While this might seem to be a passive event in the child's life from the lens of an unknowing adult, it forms a critical foundation for the child's critical thinking skills that he or she could find useful in the future.

Play and academics and curriculum

In contemporary society, it is rather unfortunate that the curriculum has been designed to favor largely the academic achievement for early learners as compared with play and the potential positive outcomes that it holds for children. Even in academics, play boosts a child's grasp of the information imparted in him or her (Edwards, 2017). To develop robust early leaders, the United States education system had identified that school heads better preparation, support, and professional development in all the states and the districts. For instance, in Illinois, the Education Department has been reaching out to school principals prior to them being engaged at their respective stations (Cooks & Lieberman, 2017). Guided, unrestricted play permits the children to inculcate skills necessary for academic success. Many studies have concluded that children who have unrestricted play tend to thrive academically more than their peers who are in somewhat restricted environments and less play.

Play and the Outdoors

As outlined in the early childhood environment section, it is important to determine the precise space that the child will play in, having considered factors such as security and appropriateness, as well as contribution to the overall intended outcome (Takhvar, 1988). However, just to reiterate, outdoor environments have been determined to be the best contexts for children to learn. When children play outside, they interact not only with other human beings (peers and adults), but also engage with nature, which is both intriguing and beneficial. For example, when children play with indoor toys, they are unable to feel the liberations and fresh feeling that the outdoor environment possesses even if the toy is identical. The breeze, of fresh air, chirping of birds, greenery, and scenery changes the picture. As children slowly advance their learning, they can relate the aspects that come with outdoor experiences to their lives. Pursuant to this, it is also critical to identify that there are games or sports that require structured plans and executions to accomplish. These are not categorized as play because they are not free and spontaneous. For example, when children are taken to skating sessions and compelled to master the skills, perhaps to satisfy the caregiver's or parents lost ambition, it is not considered play (Edwards, 2017). Even if the "play" activity is indoors, for instance, playing chess or checkers in a room, it has to be uncompelled, free, and spontaneous to be considered play.

Play and Reading and Math

Play interventions possess the capacity to influence the reading abilities of children. In her study Vukelich (1994) established that exposure to interaction and print among 56 kids from a kindergarten made them learn to read better and faster. Set in a fun and entreating environment, the kids were able to make out printed words faster as they played with the

materials. From the study, it was clear that children are able to associate meaning with practical things that are presented to them in the way of play. Similarly, researchers have established that when children are involved in play, it enables them to identify words much easier and read/comprehend words from texts that they have been exposed to during play. Play can be incorporated with skill-enhancing techniques such as reading out loud or enacting characters (Edwards, 2017). When children play while enacting some characters from various sources, they develop listening and language skills that prepare them to comprehend the written word. Even after learning to read, it is still essential for adults involved to spur children to sound out words correctly and get the meaning. Just like reading skills, play also builds children's math skills. Math skills are metric in nature. This means that the children have first to develop critical thinking skills that can prepare them for this arduous learning experience (Gol-Guven, 2017). For example, researchers have cited block play as a critical component for children to learn math. Semi-structured block play enhances math skills, for instance, in shape recognition, mathematical language, and numeracy. They are pointers to executive functioning, which includes global executive functioning and cognitive flexibility. This enhances the child's capacity to pay attention, focus, utilize environmental input, and remember information fed to them earlier in the session.

Play and Assessment

Children's play in their early and formative years is critical to their psychological intervention and assessment. Since the 1900's, multiple outcomes have been realized in child development and assessment of the programs implemented. Play offers children vital emotional, interpersonal, and cognitive learning opportunities. Many early childhood programs use their own assessments, or the assessments that are part of a curriculum. These assessments are

typically based on a student's academics. However, few studies offer rigorous validation of the assessment of play, especially considering the reality that play has not been viewed as an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.

Analysis

The significance of play in early childhood began with historians such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He significantly contributed to shaping the way play is looked at today. He believed that teachers involved in early childhood education should support kids' happiness, and it is important to encourage children to develop their own strengths (Morrison, 2007). Many benefits of play begin in the early years and remain into adulthood. The role that teachers and parents play in providing children with opportunities to play are significant in the development of the child. One study has shown that kids who are encouraged to use their imagination are more creative in their adult life (Hartwell-Walker, 2018). The environment in which children grow and learn matters in early childhood play. Brain development is critical in the early years, and play significantly impacts this process. If children are not provided with opportunities to play, it in turn effects how the neurons in their brain are developing, which will affect their entire life. Children need to be given opportunities to play so that they can develop these neurons. A growing body of science is continuously discovering the relationships between play in children and their development in various areas, including language, math, and spatial skills; executive functions and scientific thinking; emotional and social development (Weisberg et al., 206). Therefore, children should engage in physical activities to benefit play.

Play is essential among children because it fosters their cognitive, physical, emotional and social well-being. Besides, it enables kids to interact with parents, establishing a strong bond. A study by Myers (2012) established that schools with less than three hours of both

outdoor and free play should allocate more time in their daily schedules. Increased playtime enhanced the developmental outcomes of young learners. As previously mentioned, play enable the children to use their creativity while fostering their cognitive, physical, and emotional strength. The primary goal of assisting children to play is to aid their brain development. Playing allows them to learn because they interact and engage with the immediate environment. Consequently, schools should not inhibit the abilities and opportunities of kids to play. Hartwell-Walker (2018) contends that kids that are allowed to use their imaginations are more creative in their adult life. Therefore, encouraging children to play and facilitating their exercises enhances their cognitive, physical, and emotional outcomes.

Social development is an essential benefit of play. The social skills of the children develop gradually as they interact with other kids and are taught how to use and implement social skills. Children of the same age communicate effectively since they have similar competencies and abilities. However, with time, they interact with both kids of their age and older. Clements and Fiorentino (2004) argue that play enables them to learn how to communicate with people of different ages. For instance, friendships fostered through play are more likely to last for a long time. The kids with similar passions, lies, and preferences are more likely to engage in collective play. This activity enhances their cognitive, physical, and emotional development. The literature review proved that play is a vital component in the social growth of children. The learning process in children is improved by play. The areas of language, mathematics, scientific thinking, spatial skills, and executive functioning are improved significantly through play (Weisburg et al., 2016). A significant portion of the brain develops after a baby is born. Scientists approximate that from newborn age up to 17 years old spend between 3% and 20% of their day playing (Christy et al., 2016). However, it is worth nothing

that this percentage excludes children that are malnourished or disabled. A combined research field known as the science of learning identifies four critical ingredients successful for learning. Firstly, learning occurs most optimally when children are mentally active (not passive). Secondly, children need to be engaged (free from distraction). Thirdly, they are to be socially interactive (with adults and peers). Finally, kids are encouraged to fostering meaningful connections in their lives (Weisburg et al., 2013). Therefore, the development of the brain impacts the learning process among children.

Application

Play is essential in ensuring the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social well-being of the child. While research has proved the significance of play in terms of child development, many factors affect the rights of kids in that sense. Many children lack adequate free time play or engage with their parents. For instance, the contemporary lifestyles, including family structures, limited resources, and increased attention to academics interfere with child centered play. As was previously mentioned, play has been a core component of early childhood practices. The programs in this category focus on using play to spur physical, cognitive, and emotional skills. The young learner need to understand the academic concepts while developing social skills to interact with other people more effectively. Due to the inherit benefits of play, all stakeholders should adopt policies and strategies to help families, school systems, and the community to integrate play effectively and enhance the development of young children.

As a prekindergarten teacher, I can apply these practices into my classroom by ensuring that my students are given ample amount of time for play and that I provide the parents/caregivers of my students with information about play to ensure that they are giving students plenty of opportunities for play outside of the classroom environment. Parents and

teachers alike have a significant role in the early childhood learning. Kids learn from the immediate environment through experience. The brain of a child is a clean slate that gradually acquires knowledge. The kid's cognitive and social skills are largely acquired during the earlier stages of growth. For instance, responsive parenting and teaching provides a strong foundation for the development of the child. While responsiveness is contingent to early development, meeting the child's needs and expanding one's interests are beneficial. Play falls under the range of support that a child requires to acquire the various facets of learning. Parents should use the bond and trust developed through repeated positive experiences to allow the child to engage in multiple activities. The continued engagement in play allows them to gain new skills while refining their abilities. For instance, early problem solving skills are fostered through play. Parenting and teaching interventions should aim at increasing free playtime to the children and positive interactions with the parents and the teachers.

Although play is essential in the optimum development of children, not all of them are receiving adequate time. However, it is not possible to guarantee the benefits of play due to the different economic, and social conditions of the world. For instance, children in poor regions may not have access to care and their play may be limited. Conversely, some children may have the available resources, but the care they are receiving is mediocre and best practices are not in place. In the modern competitive environment, a majority of children are raised in a hurried and pressurized lifestyle. The protective measures limit the benefits of child driven play. While it is inherently difficult to change the macro-environmental factors, it is possible to leverage the positions of the parents to limit the factors that interfere with their optimum development and advocate for circumstances that will enable them to reap the advantage of play (Ginsburg, 2007). Just as with parents, teachers can make changes in their schedules that will allow children to

have the time that they need for play during their school day. Parents and teachers can work together and take small steps to make these changes and by doing so it will allow the children to reap the benefits. It is essential to work with parents/caregivers to ensure that they understand the importance of play and make any necessary changes to the schedule at home or in the school environment to ensure that children are receiving ample opportunities for play.

Encouraging child-driven play will enhance the outcomes of students in early childhood programs. Schools have progressively focused more on academics. As a teacher it is not only important to focus on student academics, but also important to focus on the amount of time that students are receiving for free play. As a teacher, facilitating student play and ensuring academics are being met can be done in a high quality early childhood environment. Children's playtime has been significantly reduced to so that programs can focus on reading and mathematics. Ginsburg (2007) notes that only 70% of kindergarten schools have a recess period in comparison to 96% ten years earlier in 1998. Many schoolchildren have reduced access to free play time and physical activity. Consequently, this reduction contravenes the benefits of play highlighted in the literature review. The cognitive functions are developed through play instead of academic work. By focusing on child driven play, the brains of the young learners will develop adequately to understand the learned concepts more easily. This approach helps in the development of cognitive abilities in young learners. Unlike adults, their understanding is affected by clear-cut and significant change in activity. For instance, a change in subject does not have the same effect as a free play recess. The secondary learning approach is ineffective because it does not offer a physical release. Therefore, increasing playtime in early childhood education will enhance the cognitive development of young learners as well as all other areas of development. My team members and I can work together to ensure that we are providing

students with ample amount of free play during the day, either indoors or outdoors. Society has impacted the significance of exploratory free play. Although many studies had not been performed on the importance of play in the earlier decades, children had more free time to practice this activity. However, in the modern age, parents are focused to introduce their kids to roles beyond their age to train them for future roles as adults. According to Elkind (2001), parents are currently influenced by carefully marketed message that foster consumerism rather than the interests of children to play. For instance, they are required to buy enrichment tools or expose their children to activities that assure them of employment in the future. Just as schools are pressured to focus on academics parents are feeling pressured. Moreover, children are being introduced to computers and enrichment videos from early infancy to match the economic need of society. The approach ensures that the young learners are well rounded and adequately stimulated for excellent development, which reduces the chances for child-centered play.

The school systems need to recognize the significance of play in the physical, cognitive, emotional development of the young learners. An important role that teachers play in ensuring that in their own classroom they are allowing for significant time for students to have free play. One ensure that this is being done by simply asking teachers what their free time looks like for the students and assist them in making any necessary changes to ensure that students are receiving the free play that they need for proper development. According to Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2001), the current educational trends focus on reducing the amount of playtime available. The stakeholders are increasingly considering play as a waste of instructional time, thus failing to see the clear benefits. Similarly, Hughes (2009) notes that instructors will only use play effectively in learning if they understand its numerous benefits and purpose. The failure to understand child development undermines the tenets of child-centered play. In this regard,

Burdette, Hillary, and Whitaker (2005) recommended that stakeholders should view play through the lens of affiliation, affect, and attention, instead of fatness and fitness. The benefits of free play are not limited to physical development. Therefore, instead of reducing time available for play and allocating it to academics, educators should use play as a significant benefit in the early development of children, and as stated before us the free time to facilitate the students play and provide them with ample opportunities that include the academics that they need to learn.

Conclusion

Play is a critical factor in building children's academic, physical, and social emotional growth. Play has undermined in previous decades, with adults ignoring the benefits it brings. Play cut across academics and there spheres, which makes it important. Similarly, it is clear that individual form their habits and character during their early formative ages, where they learn to comprehend things and enact them practically. In the process, adults tend to act as gatekeepers or supervisors who oversee the activities. It is important to note that play has various definitions, which influence the adults tasked with facilitating the process. Play has to be unrestricted, spontaneous, and with no determined outcome by the adults. Play that is free and unrestricted builds children's brains, with the prefrontal cortex being bigger as compared those of other children that do not have unconstrained play. Schools need to ensure that all children are given ample amount of time during the school day for play. Doing this will foster a student's skills, including social and emotional, cognitive, language, critical thinking, and various other skills needed for a successful life. Though much more research is necessary, play is an essential factor for children in their early education.

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