

# Is There Enough Play in Kindergarten?

Ryan Kurada

Sonoma State University

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Dr. Karen Grady

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## **Introduction**

As future early childhood educator I understand and advocate for the importance of play in early childhood education, it saddens me to see social-emotional development and play-based learning overlooked in favor of academics, especially in kindergarten.

Throughout my research here, I will address the question: Is there enough play in today's kindergarten? I am currently a pre-service teacher in a kindergarten classroom. I am interested in play-based activities that kindergarteners receive in a public school setting. I will also focus on the specific types of play students are exposed to in kindergarten.

It is widely believed that young children learn through play, but current state and federal mandates inhibit this. I will conduct a case study of my particular classroom experience and base my research on a five day observation. My research is targeted towards those early childhood educators who share similar views and would like to see more play included in the kindergarten curriculum.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Present***

Gone are the days where kindergarten was filled with ample amounts of time for block building, playing with dolls and action figures or even taking naps. Due to the increasing state and federal educational mandates, there has been an effort to make kindergarten “a one-size smaller first grade” (Miller & Almon, 2009). With the well-intentioned mission that school is the solution to success in our global economy, the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act dramatically increased standardized testing and sparked an overwhelming decrease in play-based preschools and kindergartens. NCLB goals emphasized direct academic instruction in the early

years that would set the child up for success during the rest of their schooling. Because of NCLB, schools have structured a “back to basics” curriculum with an emphasis on reading and mathematical skills mandated by state standards and standardized tests. The federal government stressed that “schools be accountable and guarantee that they offer quality education” (Jeynes, 2006, 1945). The way NCLB holds schools accountable for quality education is through standardized testing, and the only way schools receive federal funding is if they comply with rigorous standards. As schools were in danger of losing crucial funding, modified academic mandates slowly started looming over the lives of the youngest of students; teachers were forced to push students to become more academically prepared at any cost. Instead of a warm welcome with a tub full of dolls or blocks on the first day of kindergarten, five year olds became bombarded with verbal tests of letter-sound recognition and systematic drills of numbers 1 through 100.

“The early childhood curriculum is the most holistic and least differentiated at any level of education, and it is also the most solidly grounded in philosophy, in clearly articulated methodology, and in theory and research. What makes early childhood education so unique; is that it starts with the child and not the subject matter” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 8). While early childhood researchers advocate the importance of development over subject matter, this is quite the opposite of what education officials and policymakers are pushing in kindergarten. Parents are also following the call for earlier academics and are becoming increasingly concerned about their child’s academic future; instead of worrying about the quantity of building blocks in their child’s kindergarten classroom, they are “demanding that their five year olds be taught to read” (Russell, 2011, p. 250).

While some parents are joining the “race to Harvard” by starting them off “right” in academic-based preschools in preparation for kindergarten, other parents are acknowledging that the concept of an all work and no play learning environment can limit a child’s social-emotional development. In light of this concern, an increasing number of parents are delaying kindergarten entrance “by keeping their children in preschool a year longer; these parents do not feel that their children are ready for academics” (Russell 2011, 250). I believe that children who are not ready for the rigorous academic-based kindergarten are running the risk of becoming “damaged all through their education.” (Hatch 1988, 146).

### *The Past*

Let’s reflect upon the historical roots of kindergarten. Kindergarten was once an institution founded on play-based learning. German pedagogue, Fredrich Froebel created the first kindergarten in 1837 and by the 1850s his concept was commonplace in the United States. Kindergarten’s original purpose was to prepare children for their academic future and to promote their natural development. “Froebel saw his kindergarten as a sanctuary for young children. It was used to both help them prepare and protect them for the regimentation they would soon face in school” (Manning, 2005, 372). The original kindergarten classrooms were play-focused under Froebel’s belief that children learned the most when they played with their peers. In Froebel’s opinion, “what children learn when they are playing is vital for their natural development and success later in school” (Jeynes, 2006, pg. 487). Froebel believed that children learn self-discipline and socialization through play as they learn to cooperate with one another. Through play, kindergarteners learn how to make friends, resolve conflicts through self-initiated mediation, and learn to be self-sufficient with support from nurturing teachers as well as their

peer group. Engaging in play allows children to expand their vocabulary through meaningful interactions with their peers, asking questions, and using words that they've heard other people use. Games such as "hide and go seek" authentically teach children about following rules and "playing house" facilitates children's understanding of social roles in society. Play permits a child to let his or her mind be free and wonder about the world around them; children eagerly seek to replicate their learning through hands-on manipulation of various materials or through collaborative interaction.

If Friedrich Froebel aimed for kindergarten to prepare children for their academic future, why did he place so much emphasis on play instead of the "basic skills?" It is believed that Froebel viewed kindergarten as a year to prepare children's self-confidence to be able to deal with the later stress of academics. In today's work-focused kindergarten, children are not gaining the self-confidence that they need to continue learning throughout their schooling. "If academics are pressed too much, and too early, these children could end up leading to academic failure" (Dombkowski, 2001, pg. 534). In order to make early schooling experiences beneficial to children's growth, Froebel taught his children in nurturing gardens instead of classrooms and every activity was designed to evoke pleasure. The kindergarten was a place where children could discover and learn "through play, creative self-activity, and experience the natural world" (Stauch-Nelson, 2010, pg.62). The original kindergarten learning environment was very different from our modern-day kindergarten classrooms. Back then, the kindergarten classroom "curiously resembled the nineteenth century artist's studio or art classroom" (Sienkiewicz, 1985, p. 127), highly exploratory and interactive.

Fredrich Froebel believed in child-directed self-activity to set the foundation for the kindergarten curriculum. Froebel's kindergarten curriculum consisted of activities that allowed children to interact and experience lessons through focused play experiences. Motivated by his philosophies of play, Froebel created a set of twenty manipulable objects called "gifts" that are considered the earliest learning tools for young children. These "gifts" were of various forms, colors, sizes, and textures that stimulated children's senses and engaged students in learning about scientific and mathematical concepts by manipulating wooden spheres, cylinders, and cubes, modeling with clay, interlacing paper strips, and building sticks connected by softened peas. By teaching lessons about the world through touching, feeling, seeing, manipulating, tasting, and actively observing, this led children to become connected with their environment and their sense of self. Froebel's kindergarten placed emphasis on learning how to construct and replicate images and objects with one's hands in order to "symbolize a concept that has greater significance to the individual's experience of the world" (Sienkiewicz, 1985, pg. 162). Froebel left a resonating quote as he passed on his legacy to future early childhood educators; "Play is the highest phase of child development...play is the purest, most spiritual activity...it gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world" (Manning, 2005, 372).

### ***Play: Research and Definitions***

Despite the importance of play being crucial in a child's cognitive, physical, and social development, why do modern day policymakers and school officials believe that play is a waste of time in school? The American educational pendulum has swung widely away from the ideals that play is the highest phase of development, instead the notion that mastering "the basic

elements of reading, such as phonics and letter recognition, the more likely children will succeed in school” (Miller & Almon, 2009, pg. 7). Long-term research doubts the assumption that early phonics instruction and other skills lead to better academic success. Nancy Carlson-Page with the Alliance for Childhood reminds us that “faster is not better when it comes to early education” (Miller & Almon, 2009, pg. 7).

During the German educational reform of the 1970s, most of the play-based kindergartens in Germany were changed into centers for cognitive development. “Research comparing 50 play-based classes with 50 early-learning centers found that by age ten the children who had played excelled over the other group in a host of ways” (Darling-Hammond & Jon Synder, 1992, p. 48). Children who were in the play-based centers demonstrated advanced reading and mathematics and were better adjusted socially and emotionally at school. The children in play-based classes also excelled in creativity and oral expression. As a result of the study, by the 1990s, German kindergartens had returned to being play-based. Germany’s switch back to play-based kindergartens exemplifies how their culture understood the developmental needs of children and how schooling (especially before third grade) should be experiential rather than didactic. In Finland, children enjoy a lengthy and playful early childhood education as they enter first grade at age seven rather than six. Despite the “late” entry into formal grade school, Finland is consistently ranked as one of the world’s leaders in education. Expanding the time children play in kindergarten is necessary in order to develop today’s children into tomorrow’s creative problem-solvers, collaborators, and visionaries. This will also enable children to become “well-rounded” and ultimately competitive in today’s global environment. “No nation can thrive

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without a highly creative and innovative workforce” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.8).

If our goal is to educate a creative workforce, why isn't play a driving force in American early childhood education? There is now an emphasis on high stakes testing and school officials are under pressure to push formal academic instruction in kindergarten. Many recent teachers lack an understanding of why play is important. Although most states require some form of early childhood certification/endorsement in addition to a basic teaching credential, “very few states require schools to employ and assign teachers with this preparation for work in early childhood classrooms” (Fields & Mitchell, 2007).

Three university research studies were conducted in 2008 by UCLA and Long Island University addressing the current state of how children spend their time in public kindergartens today. Key findings of the studies revealed that:

1. *Teacher-directed activities are focused mainly on literacy and math skills.*
2. *Free play, or “choice time,” is usually limited to 30 minutes or less per day.*
3. *Most classrooms do not have enough materials for all children play with all at once.*
4. *Teachers claim that the major impediment to including sufficient kinder play time is that the curriculum which does not include it. They also claim there is not enough time and administrators do not value it.*

The university research findings suggest that many classroom activities which teachers describe as “play” were in fact highly teacher-directed and instilled little imaginative or creative thinking in children. This finding prompts the question “What is play?” What does play look like?” “Play is a natural and spontaneous activity of young children” (King, 1979, p. 80). While

play is natural and can be spontaneous, it is important to note that play in early childhood classrooms is not just setting aside ample time for children to run around without active adult supervision, nor is it the kind of “play” which is imposed upon the child. The two realms of high-quality play-based classroom structures are: “1) a classroom rich in child-initiated play, where children are exploring the world through their senses with active involvement of teachers and 2) a playful classroom with focused learning, where teachers guide students in achieving learning goals through rich, experiential activities” (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Sara Smilansky (1990) identifies four different kinds of play: functional play, constructive play, socio-dramatic play, and games with rules. These four major types of play contribute to a child’s growth and development as a successful learner.

- **Functional Play** occurs when children are given the opportunity to explore and examine the functions and properties of objects and materials through handling, experimenting, observing, and sensory-discovery.
- **Constructive Play** involves using materials to shape a representation of something either from a child’s direct experiences or from their imagination.
- **Socio-Dramatic Play** entails pretending or make-believe when children substitute symbols for real objects and events. Examples of socio-dramatic play would be playing house or putting on puppet shows.
- **Games with Rules** are board games or computer games, sports or any type of game that requires a set of rules that everyone understands and follows.

In the next section, I will document my study of a Rohnert Park, California public school kindergarten classroom and analyze how much of each type of play (as identified by Smilansky) is incorporated into the teacher's curriculum.

### **Methodology**

I chose to observe a public kindergarten classroom in Rohnert Park, California for five days from 8:15 am to 2:15p.m each day. The kindergarten teacher has been teaching for 25 years (kindergarten for 8 years) and is National Board Certified. My role in the classroom was a participant observer; I interacted with the students in activities and took the time to step back and take notes during the daily curriculum and teacher instruction. The classroom teacher displayed a daily schedule on the board so that students would know what subjects would be taught that day and at what time. It was clear from the schedule that literacy and math instruction took up a significant amount of the daily instruction.

I did not discuss my research study regarding play with the classroom teacher, as I did not want to interfere with the teacher's regular schedule. For my research study, I chose to focus on which types and how much play-based activities were integrated into the daily curriculum. My analysis was based upon of Sara Smilansky's four types of play discussed earlier. In the next section, I will discuss the data that I collected.

### **Data Collection: The Daily Schedule**

The classroom teacher maintains an identical schedule each week. The schedule starts off with "Morning Circle," (20 minutes duration) consisting of whole-group systematic phonics instruction (word decoding, cvc word reading and writing practice) and a minimal amount of

time (approximately five minutes) is included for singing songs. After circle time, “Teach Time” follows (35 minutes), this normally consists of students engaging in a Houghton-Mifflin read-aloud and whole-group sight word recognition practice. Next is “Literacy Centers” (55 minutes), students complete reading comprehension and vocabulary worksheets based upon the Houghton-Mifflin read-aloud. Students also engage in listening to stories from cassette tapes in small groups followed by completing phonics/word building worksheets. During the last activity of “Literacy Centers,” students engage in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a teacher-led inquiry-based discussion about a work of art. During VTS, students are encouraged to think deeply about the artwork they are observing. Students learn to make inferences as well as draw conclusions based on evidence of what they feel the artwork means to them. I find that VTS is one of the most authentic literacy strategies the classroom teacher uses to encourage imaginative and exploratory thinking among children.

After centers, 20 minutes of outdoor recess is scheduled for students to engage in free-play; climb monkey bars, kick balls, ride tricycles, or roam on the grass field.

As soon as students return from recess, they are swiftly transitioned into in a whole-group math lesson (15 minutes). During my observation, students engaged in systematic whole-group activities learning measurement, verbal word problems, shape analysis, and simple addition and subtraction problems. Toward the end of every math block, students were assessed on numbers 11-19. The teacher held up large flash cards of numbers eleven through nineteen and called on students to identify the correct number. The flashcard activity was brief and direct. After math, students transition to “Calendar” (15 minutes) where the teacher

leads the class through identifying the current day and month with occasional songs to help reinforce their understanding. “Calendar” activities also include pattern recognition and counting practice as well as weather identification.

As soon as “Calendar” is finished, students are prompted to gather in their reading level groups for “Walk to Read,” (30 minutes) which is the school’s reading intervention program. During “Walk to Read,” struggling readers are sent to different classrooms on-campus for additional systematic phonics instruction, sight word flashcard drills, and opportunities to read decodable texts. After “Walk to Read,” students break for lunch lasting 45 minutes.

After lunch, students are gathered for a whole-group read-aloud (15 minutes), followed by either a science or social studies block (45 minutes). During my observation, social studies usually consisted of various topics that related to upcoming holidays such as Martin Luther King and President’s Day. These activities included teacher-directed craft activities and worksheets which did not cover topics in-depth. The “Science block” required students to go outside in the school garden and observe plants and flowers in the garden. They would document their observations in their science journals. The last block of the day (45 minutes) is either dedicated to “Plan-Do-Review” or additional math or literacy instruction. According to the classroom teacher, Plan-Do-Review or “choice-time” is scheduled three or four times a week at the beginning the school year and gradually decreases to once or twice a week; by the end of the year. Plan-Do-Review is the classroom’s “choice-time” which allows students the opportunity to engage in any activity of interest which they choose. Plan-Do-Review is the only block time where I observed play-based activities.



*Actual Friday classroom schedule:*

8:20 Morning Circle  
 8:40 Teach Time  
 9:15 Literacy Centers  
 10:10 Snack Recess  
 10:30 Minute Math  
 10:45 Calendar  
 11:00 Walk to Read  
 11:30 Lunch  
 12:15 Story  
 12:30 Social Studies  
 1:15 Plan-Do-Review  
 2:00 Dismissal

In the next section I will analyze the data collected and identify the specific types of play, as defined by Sara Smilansky (1990), during my observation.

### **Data Analysis: Observing for Play in the Classroom**

Students were usually occupied completing worksheets rather than engaging in hands-on learning. Developmentally appropriate curriculum appeared to be lacking in my classroom of study.

#### ***Functional Play***

During my time in the classroom, students were given very little time to explore the properties of objects without direct instruction from the teacher.

During Monday's scheduled Math block, the class participated in a geometry lesson in which the classroom teacher introduced "attribute blocks." Attribute blocks are a set of plastic shapes that vary in size, length, thickness, and color. She explained what an attribute block was and gave each student a random shape from a bag and then asked them to think about what they noticed about their shape. After students observed their attribute block, the teacher began to describe each students' attribute block instead allowing the child to discover the attributes on their own. In order to have made this activity a less teacher-directed activity, the teacher could have gathered students into small-groups and allowed them to explore, experiment, and manipulate the attribute blocks. Young children need time explore and make sense of physical objects at their own pace rather than having someone dictate details about the objects.

According to Smilansky (1990), functional play occurs when children actively observe and listen. The classroom teacher engaged her students in daily sessions of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) where students are presented with a wide variety of artwork from many different media and styles. The teacher encouraged students to use their "artist eyes" to closely observe, describe, analyze, and interpret the focus artwork while being guided by three open-ended questions: "What's going on in this picture," "What do you see that makes you say that?" and "What more can we find?" VTS encourages attentive observing and listening. Students describe historical and contemporary artwork in terms of its use of line, shape, color, patterns as well as overall evaluation of the artwork. Students also learn to listen and learn from their peers' diverse perspectives during VTS discussions. Discussions about art spark many

opportunities for playful, imaginative thinking as students glean knowledge about how the artist created the work and what it means to them personally.

### **Constructive Play**

In my classroom of study, students spent a total of 2 ½ hours out of the whole week involved in constructive play, where they used open-ended objects to construct representations of their learning.

During an art lesson, a parent of one of the students discussed an artist and had students emulate the techniques inspired by the focus artwork. On the day that I observed, students learned about the 20<sup>th</sup> Abstract Expressionist artist, Helen Frankenthaler who is known for her distinctive “soak and stain” process. Students observed the focus artwork titled *Blue Atmosphere*, 1963 and were encouraged to recognize shapes within the abstractions to make sense of what they were seeing. The lesson progressed into an activity about the soaking and staining process. Students were given plain paper and tissue paper. They soaked the plain paper in liquid starch, cut shapes out of tissue paper, and “stained” their plain paper by gluing the shapes to it, making colorful and interesting abstractions. The students also learned about shapes by folding and cutting to create beautiful symmetrical designs.

During the Wednesday morning centers, I observed two constructive art activities that combined math and literacy. Students listened to the story *The Little Cloud* by Eric Carle and participated in a follow-up activity where they used their imagination and fine motor skills creating clouds from cotton balls. One girl created a bunny with her cotton ball and another boy created a fantasy figure from a movie that he had seen.

After the cloud activity, students transitioned to another activity that related to a book they read earlier in the week, *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* by Charles G. Shaw. In this activity, students pretended they spilled milk and had to create an abstract image with white tempera paint. I observed some students reviewing the book and pointing out interesting patterns, symmetry, and asymmetrical designs created by the spilled milk.

During the Plan-Do-Review block, which is scheduled almost every Thursday and Friday. Students were occupied in a variety of constructive activities designed to stimulate their creative imaginations; including block building, project centers, watercolors, and play dough. During my observations, students were naturally engaged with the open-ended materials. Students built grand fortresses with wooden blocks, designed paper jewelry at the project center, painted beautiful abstract art in watercolors, and modeled colorful animals and insects from play-dough.



*Plan-Do-Review options*

### **Socio-Dramatic Play**

I observed socio-dramatic play as part of the classroom's forty-five minute Plan-Do-Review block. "Socio-dramatic play is important for children in primary grades, because it supports the development of abstract thinking" (Smilansky, 1990). Socio-dramatic play occurs

when students use physical symbols such as puppets, toys, and costumes to express their interpretations of their social environment. During the Plan-Do-Review block, students were given many options to immerse themselves in socio-dramatic play through activities such as puppets, “Be the Teacher,” “Felt Friends” as well as playing with dolls and toys. “Be the teacher” allowed students to take on the role of the teacher and practice leadership roles amongst fellow classmates. “Felt Friends” gave students the opportunity to manipulate felt figures, script playful dialogue, and act out familiar events from imagination or literature. The act of dramatizing stories naturally teach children real-life tasks such as social problem-solving by deciding who will play different roles, what props will be used, and how to communicate with peers.

### **Games with Rules**

I observed only one activity lasting approximately fifteen minutes where students had the opportunity to engage in a structured game with rules. Playing games with rules provides opportunities for children to learn how to deal with competition and cooperate in group activities governed by a set of rules. During the P.E. block on Tuesday, the classroom teacher took students outside to the playground and played tag. As tagging is a competitive game, the teacher explicitly reminded her students that “the tagger is always right.” If the tagger says that they tagged someone, the children must accept that in order to continue playing the game. By stating that the tagger is always right, this limits any potential arguments and teaches children that games have sensible boundaries. Games with rules promote positive social interaction and build a supportive community where expectations for behavior are clearly defined.

### Conclusion

My findings confirmed there was a severe lack of play in the public school kindergarten class that I observed in. Approximately just 10% of the weekly schedule is devoted to play-based activities. Plan-Do-Review is the classroom's only "choice-time." The highly structured teacher-led environment included very little play was not conducive to an engaging learning environment.

The types of play that I observed in the classroom occurred primarily during the scheduled Plan-Do-Review block and did not contribute sufficiently to a developmentally appropriate curriculum. It was clear from my observations that kindergartners spend far more time being taught literacy and math skills through didactic instruction rather than through play. An increasing number of kindergarten teachers are given highly prescriptive curricula and "must follow scripts from which they may not deviate" (Miller & Almon, 2009, pg. 11). Children should be physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially active in all areas of the curriculum. Education policymakers tend to overlook how children learn best; they promote rigorous academic direct instruction disregarding the need for rich experiential activities.

My kindergarten classroom of study was a prime example of the unfortunate state of affairs in early childhood education. I observed in a classroom where instruction of young learners was rushed. Rigid instruction was conducted almost entirely in a whole-group setting. "Classrooms where children flit from activity to activity support reactive behavior; ...when all the instruction is whole-group, students become too teacher-regulated" (Bodrova, 2005, pg. 45). The Alliance for Childhood (2009) stated that out of a full six-hour per day kindergarten class, a minimum of three hours each day should be devoted to play. This recommended number of

hours would provide children with the essential time that they need to explore and develop their ideas, interests, while enhancing their social and emotional development.

Policymakers, researchers, educators, and parents need to take action and advocate for the importance of play and experiential learning. We need to provide adequate time, space, and materials for play in kindergarten classrooms across the nation. All types of play need to be fully addressed in the kindergarten curriculum including functional, constructive, socio-dramatic play, and games with rules which all contribute to developmentally appropriate learning. “Children in play-based kindergartens end up equally good or better at reading and other intellectual skills, and they are more likely to become well-adjusted healthy people” (Miller & Almon, 2009, pg. 8). The importance of play also needs to be brought to the attention of administrators. They need to understand that play enhances communication and cooperation and is important to social and emotional development, skills that are needed to become “college and career ready.” Play-based activities foster imagination and creativeness, qualities that should be allowed to flourish at the kindergarten level. As children grow into adulthood, these critical qualities culminate into an inventive workforce.

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