

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how informal play can influence communication development and social-emotional learning in elementary-aged children. In addition, ideas of rejection from play opportunities and the benefits of play-based learning environments were examined. These topics were explored through a comprehensive literature review that covered 18 articles, texts, and journals. It was found that informal play positively influences communication development and social-emotional learning. This development supported by play-based learning environments. This thesis recommends that teachers implement a play-based learning environment into the classroom, as well as opportunities for informal play and academic play during the school day.

Keywords: informal play, academic play, communication development, social-emotional learning, play-based learning environment, elementary education.

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INTRODUCTION

“Hey Jack, I’ll be the chef and you can be the waiter,” Sally says. Jack happily agrees, taking a paper menu, and the game begins.

“Sally, I want to use the spoon,” exclaims Jack.

“No Jack, only the chef gets the spoon,” says Sally. Jack grabs the spoon quickly and Sally is knocked into the wall. Sally begins to cry, and Jack is visibly angry. Within minutes a happy game has turned into a contentious one.

Mrs. Smith watches over this scene and wonders if adopting play into the classroom proves to have more benefits or risks.

Informal play supports varying aspects of social development and interaction amongst children, including communication and language. In addition, “Children are biologically designed to pay attention to the other children in their lives, try to fit in with them, to be able to do what they do, to know what they know” (Gray, 2016, p. 1).

Children have this biological need to fit in with other children, which leads to a willingness to participate in games and situations where they must communicate and assimilate to their peers. These interactions with their peers lead to social-emotional development and more.

In our early research for this project, we noted that many articles and studies about play in the classroom focused on the early childhood age range. Although we intended to focus primarily on elementary school children’s (ages 5-10) experiences, there was not as much

information to review. Although there is a dearth of research, we aim to connect the research from the early grades with how it may transfer and be applied to the elementary grades. We examine the questions: What is the impact of play on elementary-aged children's development of social-emotional and communication skills? Can this information be translated into the classroom? Through a literature review paired with own-experience-vignettes, we aim to answer these questions in the thesis.

DEFINITION OF KEY IDEAS

In this paper, **communication development** is defined as how a student learns to talk with other children in a socially acceptable manner and the process through which this develops over time. To communicate in a socially accepted manner would entail active listening as well as speaking in turns. To communicate effectively, on the other hand, is the ability a child develops to clearly express one's opinions, ideas, and feelings to people around them (Ho and Funk, 2018). Another aspect of effective communication is the ability for these opinions, ideas, and feelings to be received by others.

In this paper, the term **social-emotional development** explains the development of a child's social skills and emotion regulation strategies. When a child has a high level of social-emotional development, they understand their emotions and the emotions of others, and how emotions impact their social interactions (Ho and Funk, 2018). This means that a child with strong social-emotional development can be empathetic to the situations of their peers, which leads to effective conflict resolution.

When we speak of **non-verbal communication**, we describe examples of communication that occur through body language, facial expressions, and actions. We aim to showcase how both verbal and non-verbal types of communication develop

through play. Children learn the verbal codes (please/thank you, can I do X, these are the rules) while also learning non-verbal cues (thumbs up/thumbs down, okay, etc).

A **prepared play environment** is an area set up for informal play. For example, Jack and Sally are playing in a prepared restaurant environment, which was set up by the teacher. In short, a prepared play environment is one designed by the teacher to entice the students into informal play experiences with their peers.

The term **informal play**, or spontaneous play, is defined as unstructured play and free time, with little-to-no adult intervention. Informal play can take place both in a prepared environment or in a free space. In a prepared environment, informal play could look like a faux grocery store or a doctor's office. In a free space, informal play could take the form of a kickball game on the playground. Overall, informal play is *child-based* play time. The quote, "The purpose of play-based learning is inherent in its name: to learn while at play" stands to explain what we mean by informal play in this thesis (Hunter, 2019, p. 18). For example, informal play can include recess time, kickball games, and playing with blocks, wherein students learn skills through play.

On the other hand, students can engage in **formal play**, where the teacher or adult sets up the structured play environment. In a structured play environment, teachers are setting up an area with the intention that students will play certain games to learn certain skills. For example, the teacher may bring in items such as pretend band-aids, blood pressure cuff, and reflex hammer, and set it up in a specific location in the classroom. The students are then able to play in this area informally with each other, although it is structured by the materials in the environment, with the goal of students learning about medical roles and terms. A kickball game that takes place at recess, however; would not

be an example of a structured play environment, as students are not guided to the materials and environment for a specific purpose. When students are taken outside for recess, they are often creating their own rules and terms for play. For example, a kickball game led by an adult must follow specific rules, everyone must take equal turns, and the game has a strict structure. A kickball game led by students is more unstructured, as the rules are flexible and students are in charge of how the game will play out.

Students may also engage in **academic play**, where the play is centered around a core subject (science, math, history, etc.). This is a type of formal play where the teacher sets up the structured environment where the play occurs and where the play is based on an academic subject. For example, students can play Number-Tac-Toe, where they must add or multiply numbers to get sums/products equal to numbers on a Tic Tac Toe playing board. Number Tac Toe encourages students to practice their addition or multiplication skills, and has an academic base (Schiro, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature evaluated and referenced in this section comes from peer-reviewed journals and articles, the Massachusetts State Standards, Vivian Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play* text, and personal experience in the classroom. Throughout the literature review, we first discuss the benefits of play in terms of communication development and social-emotional development. Second, we examine play-based learning environments in terms of the teachers role in creating lessons that engage the students through play. Next, we present the connections of play-based learning to the 2018 Massachusetts State Standards, focusing on the elementary grades. The fourth section of the literature review

discusses the outcomes that occur when children are not given the opportunity to develop social-emotional and communication skills through play.

Benefits of Play

There are two main benefits of play discussed within this section. The first is the development of communication skills wherein students learn how to communicate effectively with their peers. The second benefit of play is the development of social-emotional skills: learning to understand and communicate feelings with others, regulating student emotions, showing sympathy and empathy towards others, and responding in non-verbal ways to situations (offering a hug, or knowing when to take a step away from a situation). These play-based learning benefits are highlighted in the early childhood education research, but through our own student teaching experiences, we believe they translate well to the upper grades.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a skill that can be developed in a variety of ways. For example, creating a language-rich classroom by “structuring a safe environment that lets children know that they, and their ideas and ways of communicating them, are valued and respected” can help children learn to communicate with each other (Seefeldt, p.1). In addition, communication is a skill that can be learned from watching and listening to others interact. Although communication can be learned in a variety of ways, this thesis focuses on communication development through play.

Children learn through playing with their peers. In playing games, oral communication occurs—children teach each other rules, call out phrases, and have side conversations. As seen in the first vignette, the students are communicating about who

will play which role. “Exposure to instances of interpersonal differences of opinion and thought with one’s peers” may occur during this playtime and that may lead to “opportunities for discussion and negotiation about these differences” (Coplan, Rubin, Findlay, 2006, p. 76).

Jack walks up to Sally and hands her a menu that has 3 foods listed: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Oreos, and orange juice.

Sally says, “Ew, Oreos are gross! I don’t want them on my menu!”

“But I like them! Can’t we have them?”

Sally sighs. “Fine, as long as we can have Goldfish too.”

“I love Goldfish! We can have them both at our restaurant.”

As seen in this vignette, Jack and Sally are having a difference of opinion. Then, through the use of negotiation tactics, they come to a resolution. During interactions like this one, children learn how to communicate effectively with their peers, as they learn the linguistic features of social communication (Auerbach, 2006).

When children enter the school system, they come into contact with other children and the games they play simply by being together. Currently, the most common time for play is during recess; however, play can occur many times throughout the school day. Learning through play occurs through a wide variety of play scenarios, including spontaneous, formal, and academic. Play may happen during math, such as a game that aims to improve the memorization of multiplication facts. It could also take the form of role-playing or a spontaneous kickball game. The research presents the idea that students learn the same amount of communication skills while engaging in spontaneous/informal play as they would when engaging in academic or formal play (Breathnach, 2017).

Students do require a mix of spontaneous and academic play, as academic play provides more content learning while spontaneous play provides more social-emotional learning. Academic play does also offer opportunities for social-emotional learning, but the focus is academic content.

How do children communicate with each other? Do children teach each other new terms and language? When in the classroom or on the playground, children are constantly communicating with each other: passing notes, talking, sharing games. This communication that occurs teaches children new things everyday—whether it be a game, a song, or even just one word. It is important to remember that communication development does not *only* occur throughout play. It also occurs during classroom conversations, through reading and responding to texts, and through everyday interactions within the classroom. Language and communication skills include reading, writing, speaking, and listening, all of which are supported in the classroom, and even through play (Anisfeld, 1994). When students communicate with one another, they are also learning other communication skills such as how to express their opinions to others. “Communication development for young children includes gaining the skills to understand and to express thoughts, feelings, and information” (Gooden & Kearns, 2013, p. 1). The first time that children may verbalize their opinions, it may not go exactly as they planned. Over time and throughout interactions with peers, students learn what strategies work best to communicate what they need to say. It seems presumptuous or even ridiculous to say that playing Miss Mary Mack on the playground teaches children to talk about their emotions, but it is not that presumptuous of an idea. When children learn through play, they are learning people skills, such as negotiation and problem-

solving, which highlights that “Peer relationships are essential for the development of skills for cooperation, compromise, empathy, and altruism” (Coplan, Rubin, Findlay, 2006, p. 77). Take for example:

Jack and Sally play Miss Mary Mack while waiting to go back into the classroom after recess each day. On this day, Jack accidentally hits Sally’s hand harder than expected. Sally, wincing in pain and furious, must now make a decision. Will she hit Jack back, get the teacher, or use her words to express how she is feeling?

Sally then is thrust into a situation where she must learn how to solve the problem. To solve this type of problem, she needs communication skills—she must know how to express her emotions and explain, in a clear and understandable manner, how she feels to Jack. Something as simple as a game can give a child the opportunity to learn so much about communication. In Jack and Sally’s case, Sally has learned through other play-based interactions how to effectively solve problems and appropriately resolve this situation. An appropriate resolution in this case would be for Sally to use her words and express her feelings, which she will have learned in other instances of play. Jack has had opportunities to learn empathy and sympathy skills through play, which could help him in his efforts to resolve the situation. Both students can use skills learned through past play experiences to help solve their current problem. While our vignette depicts younger children, we have seen situations like this one arise in our upper-grade student teaching experiences. We have been able to witness third and fifth graders resolve conflicts using similar social-emotional strategies learned through play.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

In addition to supporting communication development, play also helps children develop social-emotional skills. For example, “Play reduces stress, improves self-expression, supports emotional development, strengthens physical development and much more” (Auerbach, 2006, p. 1). When researching social-emotional development in elementary aged children, we found a correlation between strong social-emotional skills and success in play. A student with strong social-emotional skills has the ability to understand others' problems, take the perspective of a peer, and show interest in others. These students are naturally better “players,” as they can fit in with their peers, compromise when necessary, negotiate, and communicate effectively (Ho and Funk, 2018). In an uncontrolled environment, like recess or unstructured playtime, students are able to develop these skills through interacting with peers. When playing a structured math game, like *Number-Tac-Toe*, for example, students learn negotiation tactics, compromise, and how to communicate with others. During these times, “children invent or adapt rules to enable play to go more smoothly, to be fairer, and also to be more fun” (Bergen, 2009, p. 419). It is clear that children may adapt the rules in order to have a more fun experience, it is also helping to improve their social and intellectual skills (Bergen, 2009). Adaptations made to games are beneficial for developing social-emotional skills because they provide an opportunity for students to have negotiations with each other.

Half way through the game, Jack and Sally are both playing the role of the chef.

Jack has a spoon and Sally does not.

Jack states, “Sally can you mix the food on the stove?”

“But I don’t have a spoon like you Jack!” exclaims Sally.

Jack then looks around for a spoon for Sally. He cannot find a second spoon, but instead holds up a marker. “Here Sally, you can use this marker as your spoon!”

“Thanks!” says Sally.

Sally and Jack have adapted the rules of the game: they do not need two spoons, they can create an alternative out of classroom supplies and/or the objects around them. Students can have conversations like these, where they learn how to change and adapt the rules and societal norms around a game. Changing and adapting rules and norms allow students to practice social-emotional skills such as negotiation, problem solving, perspective taking, and empathetic listening (Ho and Funk, 2018; Huitt, 2009). Students are using their flexible thinking skills in order to have a fair playing experience with each other. Negotiations may arise during the adaptation process, as well as playing the game.

Teachers can draw upon the social-emotional skills of students to enhance their academic learning. To think of academic learning and social emotional learning as separate entities would be inappropriate as “learning is not compartmentalized into separate domains and as all learning is inextricably intertwined” (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011, p. 6). A child does not learn academic content areas without learning social-emotional skills. Take for example, social studies content. A third-grade standard on page 55 of the Massachusetts History and Social Science Frameworks states:

1. Explain who the Pilgrim men and women were and why they left Europe to seek a place where they would have the right to practice their religion; describe their journey, the government of their early years in the Plymouth Colony, and analyze their relationships with the Wampanoag and Abenaki/Wabanaki people.

A thorough analysis of the relationship is not possible without being able to take the perspective of either party. The converse is also true. Students cannot learn about social-emotional skills without academic learning. The social-emotional skills students have learned through play can help them meet the objectives of this standard. To illustrate this fact, we draw attention back to the standard. There is a need to have background knowledge in the content in order to analyze the relationship, but students also need the social-emotional skills of empathy/sympathy and perspective taking to critically look at the relationship between the two groups of people. As seen in *The Evidence Base for How We Learn*, “social, emotional, and cognitive capabilities are fundamentally intertwined....they are interdependent in their development, experience, and use” (Jones et al., 2017, p.7). Academic learning can be fostered through the social-emotional skills students learn through play. As evidenced in the Massachusetts State Standards, social-emotional skills can support academic learning. In addition to the many benefits of informal play, there are many social-emotional benefits that develop through the creation and use of a play-based learning environment to support academic content.

PLAY-BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT BENEFITS

An overarching theme in the literature suggests that teachers must implement a play-based learning environment in their classrooms, which can be rather ambiguous. According to Hunter (2019), “it is the way in which educators craft the learning environment and learning experience that will have the greatest impact on the way a child learns” (19). With this in mind, it is completely up to the teacher to design a lesson that is child-centered, while still incorporating academic content-based learning. The teacher is required to have an accurate and detailed working knowledge of the standards that they

are required to teach. Given the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and Standards, teachers are encouraged to create lessons that simultaneously teach the content and allow students to learn in a community through hands-on group projects. As seen in the History and Social Science standards (2018), for example:

An effective history and social science education develops social and emotional skills. Social and emotional learning has demonstrated an increase in academic achievement and communication skills, improve attitudes and behaviors, and develop empathy (16).

Furthermore, included in the 2018 Massachusetts English Language Arts and Literacy frameworks are standards based on collaboration. This highlights the idea that social emotional learning and collaboration are so critical to children's overall learning that they are included in the state's frameworks along with the content standards.

According to many researchers, children learn best when presented with the opportunity to learn in a community setting (Jones and Kahn, 2017). A “child must make his knowledge his own, but... he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture” (Corsaro et. al., 1988, p. 879). How does a play-based learning environment foster the kinds of learning that the standards call for?

Unlike what may come to the average parent’s mind when thinking about play, “teaching through play requires skill and professional expertise often underutilized in our classroom teachers” (Aiono, 2017, p.2). If a teacher wants to implement play in a meaningful way, they would need to be aware of the “planning, resourcing, facilitation and deliberate acts of teaching within the pedagogy of play” (Hunter, 2019, p. 18).

Teaching through play is a deliberate and well-crafted performance, which may vary from the typical idea of what play looks like at home.

In order to create an environment that supports play, the teacher needs to create a space that is “designed to stimulate children’s natural curiosity, exploration, and play with learning-oriented objects/materials” (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011, p. 7). A classroom like this would include STEM bins, manipulatives, craft supplies, and a prepared play environment. Teachers, after preparing their rooms in this way, are faced with the next piece of the teaching-with-play puzzle: “knowing when to gift knowledge to students at the point of meaningful absorption and understanding and when to stay silent for fear of interrupting the magic of the play” (Aiono, 2017, p.1). This is where professional expertise comes to fruition. Teachers, through observations, professional development, and classroom teaching experience, perfect this craft. This type of environment can support elementary-aged children in content learning. For example, when learning the relationship between force and motion in science, students benefit from completing a hands-on, play-based activity. Instead of reading a textbook, students could experiment with the force necessary to push a ball forward 7 inches, or could create an experiment wherein they must test the force needed to keep a pendulum swinging for a specific amount of time. In thinking about these benefits of a play-based learning environment, the question comes to mind: What happens when children don’t play?

REJECTION

Vivian Paley discusses the idea of rejection in play in her book, *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play*. Paley explains that everyone knows the sound of rejection—that students understand rejection at a much younger age than we believe. However; she is quick to point out that the same kids are repeatedly rejected and excluded from play (Paley, 1992). These students are missing out on opportunities for communication development when

they are continually excluded from informal playtime. When teachers include structured playtime into the classroom, they sometimes force inclusion—which does not always work in their favor.

Jack and Sally are continuing their game when Annie walks up. “Can I play too?” she asks. Jack, frowning, is quick to say no.

“No, go play somewhere else.” Annie, feeling lonely and sad, turns away, eyes filling with tears. Mrs. Smith, who hears this, rushes over.

“Jack! That’s not very nice. You should let Annie play with you.” Turning to Sally, Mrs. Smith continues. “You wouldn’t like it if you were left out, would you?” All three kids are silent. Mrs. Smith, taking this as agreement, walks away to tend to the other students.

Annie knows she is the rejected child, the odd one out in this situation. Jack and Sally know this too. While Mrs. Smith saw this rejection occur, it often goes unseen. “The rejected children know who they are, whether or not they tell us” (Paley, 1992, p. 15). Rejection continues to fall on the same children time and time again, and teachers strive to find ways to cease rejection in play at any occurrence. Rejection occurs in every age range and these skills learned from rejection and returning to play after rejection would be applicable in all elementary grades. As evident in the research, when there is more opportunity for informal play, students are gifted more opportunities to form social bonds with their peers, leading to less rejection (Collins, 2013; Ho & Funk, 2018; Paley, 1992). For example, students with lower social-emotional skills and fewer opportunities for social bonding are, “More likely to suffer rejection by classmates, have low self-esteem [and do] poorly in school” (Ho & Funk, 2018, p.1). Giving students informal play

opportunities can counteract this, as it allows for them to develop their social-emotional skills and social bonds.

To include students in play, teachers can implement more play opportunities in the classroom and model play and social strategies. The use of academic games is crucial: they give the students the space to play under the rules and structured guidelines of the classroom. For example, students who may not play together willingly on the playground are encouraged, under the rules of the classroom, to interact: they must communicate and work together. The social bonds formed during these academic games will encourage communication, and therefore heighten both social-emotional skills and communication skills.

With this being said, there are strategies that teachers can use to help rejected students re-enter play. Teachers can create specific play situations that encourage positive communication between students (Collins, et. al., 2013). For example, a teacher may set up a kitchen environment, such as the one that Jack and Sally are playing in. The teacher may then create the groups of students that will play in each area, so there is no room for the students to reject students such as Annie. In addition, the teacher may model how to play in the area. She may state, “Annie, could you please pass me the spoon,” as an example of how to politely ask for an item. Another strategy that the teacher could use is to give each student a responsibility in the play (Collins et.al., 2013). The teacher might assign Jack the role of the chef, Sally the role of the waitress, and Annie the role of cashier. This would give each student responsibility for a part of the play, but still allow them the freedom to play.

If the teacher notices the same problem arising in multiple groups of students, they may use children's literature to discuss the matter and model how to appropriately solve the problem. For example, the teacher may notice Jack and Sally arguing over the menu the same day she saw Kate and Anthony arguing over the blocks. The teacher may notice that sharing seems to be a common problem throughout the classroom. The teacher may decide to read *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister, which has a theme of sharing and caring. In the Ho and Funk (2018) article, the strategy of using a children's book to help develop social-emotional skills is discussed: "To connect the characters and situations in the book with the children's experiences, Ms. Coz plans to read the book...[and ask] meaningful questions [such as] "How would you solve the problem?" and "What could we do differently if this happens in our classroom?" (p. 1). Asking open-ended questions encourages the students to describe their own arguments, and come up with solutions they can use if the problem arises again. Reading the text and having the discussion gives the student and teacher a basis for discussion when problems arise and the teacher needs to intervene. Through this activity, the students are learning the appropriate language to use when discussing challenging situations in the classroom. The Gradual Release of Responsibility model may come into play here as well. The teacher may model appropriate problem-solution behavior and then discuss it. Following, the class may role play possible situations, to allow the students to practice their newly acquired strategies. Finally, the teacher may set the students free to play and if a problem arises, it is up to them to try the strategies on their own.

USE IN THE CLASSROOM

As evident in the benefits outlined above, play is an effective strategy to use in the classroom. Teachers can build effective communication skills, and the corresponding social emotional skills, through structured and unstructured play in the classroom. First, it is important that teachers understand the correlation between improved communication skills and improved social-emotional skills. As read in “Promoting Young Children’s Social and Emotional Health,” students with strong social-emotional skills have greater interest in play, as well as better compromising and negotiating skills (Ho & Funk, 2018). Teachers can develop these skills through the reading of books, giving effective praise, and modeling appropriate behaviors. When modeling these behaviors, teachers should “[listen] with full attention...[accept and reflect] on children’s feelings...spend quality time with individuals...and teach skills intentionally” (Ho & Funk, 2018, p. 1). That might mean sitting down with a small group to play the math game Number Tac Toe, and using that time to model social-emotional skills such as what to do when you lose a game, how to solve conflicts, and appropriate conversation skills. If teachers follow these proposals, communication skills and social-emotional skills will flourish in the classroom.

Second, when implementing play into the classroom, teachers should reflect on how play promotes the development of language not typically used in the classroom. When students engage in imaginative, real-world based play, they “support each other in using the particular language of [for example] a doctor’s office: fever, X-ray, medicine” (Dinnerstein, 2020, p.1). This type of play allows students to understand more about their environment and learn the niche terms surrounding certain areas or topics of everyday life (doctor’s office, vet clinic, restaurant). When teachers ask students to play specific

games—math games, reading games—they are typically asking students to focus on new vocabulary terms that relate to their academics. When students play typical informal games about restaurants and doctors’ offices, they are learning more authentic, conversational vocabulary—words that, while not academic, are necessary for being a part of our society. Students need this vocabulary, and it is most often found, in schools, in the hands of informal, student-based play.

Additionally, if teachers give students the time and space to engage in this type of informal play, they are allowing them the opportunity to develop other, more academic skills. For example, building a block tower can teach students about balance, and creating a menu or prescription can facilitate literacy development (Dinnerstein, 2020). If a teacher makes careful observations and asks meaningful, Socratic questions, he or she can further this development through encouraging the students to reflect on their choices during play time. Asking questions such as, “Why are you writing down what you have for food options?” and “How is the tower still able to balance on only one block?” can allow students to think more critically about their activity.

PANDEMIC- AND AGE-RELATED GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

It is clear that, during the pandemic of 2020, young children had little to no interpersonal interactions with children outside of their immediate families. These interactions, which would normally occur during the school day, have been taken out of daily schedules due to the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent social distancing rules. Virtual learning does allow time for students to communicate academically, but there is a lack of social communication. Before school, recess, and after-school activities were all times when children could interact and play with one another, providing valuable

informal learning opportunities. Due to the pandemic, students' recess now consists of time off the screen, alone at their own homes. Even if students are doing school in person, they are still being socially distanced. This means that students are not allowed to come within six feet of each other, which does not provide them with the time to be social. Students are not allowed to play with one another, which will most definitely impact their social development. As seen in our student teaching classrooms, students are missing out on social interaction time during the school day. We believe that the pandemic-based restrictions are causing students to have fewer opportunities for social-emotional skill learning, as they are given little-to-no opportunity to interact with each other. There is no group work, and recess is strictly monitored to maintain social distancing requirements. We believe that students will suffer socially during this time, and that more unstructured play time will need to be utilized in the future to develop these skills.

There is a gap in the research on play focusing on children that are older than daycare/preschool/early elementary age. Most research on the importance of play in learning has been done on children around the preschool/early elementary ages (generally, through kindergarten). These children are roughly aged two to seven. The research that exists for this age group includes case studies of particular classrooms and anecdotal research from teachers' stories. The target age for this literature review is children in elementary school, who are roughly aged five to ten. There is some research for this elementary age group, but it is not as extensive as the research conducted for the younger age group, as upper elementary aged children are expected to do more work and have less playtime in schools. More research should be conducted on this upper grade

group, as the students serve to benefit from play implementation in the classroom.

Throughout this literature review, we have uncovered the extensive benefits that derive from play in the elementary classroom but believe that there could be more research done to further highlight these benefits.

CONCLUSION

Within the vignette discussed at the beginning of this thesis, Mrs. Smith poses the question, “Does adopting play into the classroom prove to have more benefits or risks?” Through our review of the literature, we found that adopting play into the classroom proves to have copious benefits for both social-emotional development and communication development. The research conducted focused more on younger elementary students, but we can postulate that the benefits would continue through the upper elementary grades, as the skills continue to develop as students have more opportunities for play. Given this, we believe that play is important to include throughout middle and high school curriculums as well. The benefits of play include the development of negotiation skills, problem-solving abilities and perspective taking. It is evident that play-based learning environments encourage social bonding opportunities, which diminishes the occurrence of play-based rejection. Through reading the Massachusetts State Standards, it is clear that play is a promising instructional tool to develop the skills necessary to meet the standards. The Elementary Core Methods courses at Salem State teach future teachers the importance of student communication, social-emotional skill development, and interest in a given subject area. The courses look at play as a method to achieve success in these areas. As Auerbach (2006) states, “The potential

for play is anywhere and at any time,” which should include the classroom, as the benefits from play are numerous (p. 1).

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