



From the Children's Garden to Elementary Boot Camp:
Kindergarten, Pedagogy, and Our Youngest, Most Impressionable Students

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Abstract

Play-based pedagogy and practices used to dominate in the kindergarten classroom, empowering students to actively participate in the learning process. Within this child-centered model, teachers took a backseat while children were given the freedom to play and explore. However, since the 1983 publication of the “A Nation at Risk” report and the legislative policies that have been enacted since then, a broad system of standards was introduced into American education. It was only a matter of time before academic work started creeping into early childhood education, crowding out playtime and stifling the once nourishing nature of kindergarten. Today, instead of encouraging skills such as collaboration, creative thinking, discovery, and imagination, many teachers are forced to ignore the unique interests and curiosities of each individual child. Many kindergarten and even prekindergarten teachers have succumbed to the pressure to prioritize essential literacy and math skills over free play and exploration. Driven by a culture of competition and efficiency, this paradigm shift reflects the growing emphasis on accountability and standardization within the education system. But in the process of reconstructing and reshaping the system of American kindergarten, we have lost the key piece that once centered and fueled this entire enterprise: the inquiries of the child. While the academic pushdown taking place is alarming, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic could present an opportunity for overhaul. As we work to transition young students back to in-person learning, we need to account for their social emotional needs now more than ever.

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Introduction

There was a time, nearly half a century ago, when kindergarten was strictly play-based, free of textbooks and teacher-centered instruction. The role of the teacher was to nourish, assist, and guide, while the child was free to engage in exploration and unstructured play. Children were empowered to take charge of their learning while engaging in a plethora of subjects, from science to dance. Reading instruction was centered around acquiring basic skills, rather than expecting students to leave as fluent, proficient readers. Materials were designed to promote discovery and collaboration. But above all, kindergarten was fun.

Since the 1983 publication of the report “A Nation at Risk” and the legislative policies that have been enacted since then, a broad system of standards was introduced into American education.¹ It was only a matter of time before academic work started creeping into early childhood education, crowding out playtime and stifling the once nourishing nature of kindergarten. Today, instead of encouraging skills such as collaboration, creative thinking, discovery, and imagination, many teachers are forced to ignore the unique interests and curiosities of each individual child. With pressure mounting to teach essential literacy and math skills, “many kindergarten teachers and even prekindergarten teachers say that time for free play and exploration is increasingly limited.”² Driven by a culture of competition and efficiency, this paradigm shift reflects the growing emphasis on accountability and standardization within the education system. But in the process of reconstructing and reshaping the system of American kindergarten, we have lost the key piece that once centered and fueled this entire enterprise: the inquiries of the child.

¹ United States, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 1983).

² Jen Scott Curwood, “What Happened to Kindergarten?,” *Scholastic*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/what-happened-kindergarten/>.

Growing up as guinea pigs in terms of the implementation of these new measures, many people my age have little-to-no recollection of what pre-academic kindergarten looked like or entailed. Essentially, it was seen as a play-based program that could help young kids make a gradual transition from home life to the world of school.³ Because preschool attendance was much lower than it is today, kindergarten teachers were tasked with guiding students in the development of social-emotional skills, character-building, and, most importantly, play. Long-time preschool and kindergarten teacher and journalist McKenna Meyers describes her memory of kindergarten as a time of joy and wonder: “You may remember watching your lima bean sprout in its plastic cup on the windowsill. You may remember pretending to cook up spaghetti and meatballs with your friends in the play kitchen. You may remember painting at the easel and discovering that red combined with blue made purple.”⁴ Children were free to participate in activities that suited their interests, while teachers stood on the periphery of play, watching as students took the lead and stepping in to enrich learning when warranted. Teachers served as a quiet presence in the classroom without dominating the playtime experience.⁵

Additionally, kindergarten was a place where children were encouraged to ponder the world around them and take risks without fear of judgement by their teachers or peers. The concept of “failure,” which is often viewed as a setback today, was taken as a lesson that could be used to promote personal growth. As suggested by preschool and kindergarten teacher and early childhood education researcher Vivian Gussin Paley, play is the model for the life-long

³ Livia Gershon, “Why Did Kindergarten Become Just Another Grade?,” *JSTOR Daily*, June 3, 2015, <https://daily.jstor.org/kindergarten-become-just-another-grade/>.

⁴ McKenna Meyers, “What’s Wrong with Kindergarten in America and How We Can Fix It,” *We Have Kids*, updated April 28, 2020, <https://wehavekids.com/education/American-Kindergarten>.

⁵ Meyers, “What’s Wrong with Kindergarten in America.”

practice of trying out new ideas.⁶ Pretending enables us to experiment with different concepts and ask critical questions that promote new understandings. And with the children at the center of classroom learning, students were able to take risks in accordance with their abilities. Rather than enforcing a curriculum that labeled students as “incapable” if they did not meet a certain set of standards, the kindergarten classroom was a space that valued each student and their individuality.

Play is also an important pedagogical approach that enables students to process unprecedented changes in the world around them. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the school closures that ensued, the lives of children across the globe have been upended. Students have lost critical learning and social opportunities as a result of months of home confinement and virtual instruction. Now, as we begin transitioning students back to the classroom, we need to consider how to help them reacclimate to classroom learning in healthy and supportive ways. We must incorporate pedagogical strategies that will support students’ social-emotional development and help them build resilience in the face of adversity. In this Honors Thesis, I argue that we must re-envision kindergarten education and abolish the destructive, standardized practices that permeated the American education system before the pandemic. Now is the perfect time to review how kindergartens have changed in recent decades and put students on a better path that fosters motivation through play. This Honors Thesis is grounded in extensive research and my classroom experiences as a student teacher in the fall of 2021 at Division Street Elementary School in Saratoga Springs, New York.

⁶ Vivian Gussin Paley, *A Child’s Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 92.

Chapter 1: Fostering Enthusiasm for Learning

Part I: Academic Pushdown

How Did We Get Here?

Despite what experts have described as the best way for young children to be educated, play in kindergarten classrooms has taken a backseat to rigid academic practices that promote a results-oriented view of education.⁷ Instead of fostering each child's innate curiosities and unique interests, many teachers are focused on preparing students academically for first grade.⁸ With opportunities for play increasingly limited and materials that promote play and imagination being removed from the classroom, kindergarteners are experiencing an academic pushdown sparked by a number of policies aimed at improving the academic performance of American students. But we cannot give politicians all the credit (or blame). Followed by the growth of nursery schools and childcare centers, parents and administrators assumed that children would have enough time to play before they entered kindergarten.⁹

This association between play and the lack of "productivity," along with the notion that American students were falling behind their international counterparts in terms of academic achievement, led to major changes in the classroom. Instruction largely shifted from child-centered to teacher-centered, with teachers attending to a lengthy checklist of skills that students must acquire. Instead of moving around the classroom and actively exploring the environment around them, many students can now be found sitting quietly at tables writing in workbooks.¹⁰

⁷ Valerie Strauss, "Kindergarten Teacher: 'Why Our Youngest Learners Are Doomed Right Out of the Gate' – and a Road Map to Fix It," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/05/08/kindergarten-teacher-why-our-youngest-learners-are-doomed-right-out-gate-road-map-fix-it/>.

⁸ Meyers, "What's Wrong with Kindergarten in America."

⁹ Paley, *A Child's Work*, 45.

¹⁰ Meyers, "What's Wrong with Kindergarten in America."

Most visibly, however, is the reality that kindergarten is no longer a place in which students engage in joyful learning. After reading accounts written from the perspectives of educators and experts in the field, I think the consensus appears to be that kindergarten is now a place of stress and fear for many students.

The shift from play-based to academic practices taking place in kindergarten classrooms across the country has raised questions surrounding age-appropriate content presented to kindergartners. Nevertheless, I agree with Vivian Paley that the problem is not so much the addition of academic content into the curriculum. Rather, it is the way these ideas have been interpreted in practice and the reduction of play within the classroom that call for re-evaluation (and possibly reformation).¹¹ Especially since kindergartners today are coming into the classroom with a greater extent of knowledge and more years of classroom experience under their belts, they have the capacity (in theory) to take on more rigorous material than kindergartners half a century ago.

With that said, this material still needs to be presented in a captivating and dynamic way that puts the child at the center of learning. In this paper, I argue that to meaningfully and effectively engage kindergarten-age children in learning, we should not be turning to textbooks, testing, and hands-off teaching. Instead, if we wish to capture the attention of kindergartners and hook them on the idea of education, we need to turn back to play-based practices while incorporating certain academic elements such as early literacy skills. Ultimately, if kindergartners are not engaged early on, then we risk losing them to a system that is driven by results rather than the needs and pursuits of each individual child.

¹¹ Paley, *A Child's Work*, 46.

Methods and Theory

To get to the heart of why play is relevant and developmentally appropriate for kindergarten-aged children, I draw on a number of methods. The method that drives much of my writing is a “close reading” of academic articles and journals, news articles, and books. They provide a window into what is going on in kindergarten from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and experts. Many people view the contemporary kindergarten classroom from a critical lens, using real-life experiences and data to argue that the academic transformation that has taken place is disruptive and impractical. Yet some researchers discredit the ideas of academics to bolster their reasoning and position, which is counterproductive to this essay’s goal. I want to find a way to incorporate academic ideas and standards within a curriculum driven by play-based practices. What many people fail to consider is that Common Core and other initiatives to promote standards are here to stay. Since we cannot eradicate them (at least right now and in the near future), we need to find a way to integrate them into the classroom in engaging, immersive, and relevant ways.

I also use an oral history and have conducted interviews, both of which are primary sources. I listened to several episodes of the *Path to Learning* podcast, in which the hosts interview educators across the field and reflect on what is working, what is broken, and how best to advocate for children. They examine the forces preventing a return to play-based education and why hands-on learning is beneficial for young children. Although I only incorporate one of the podcast interviews into this paper, I found many of the episodes to be insightful. The creators of the podcast stress the importance of implementing play within the school setting, but the focus is on empowering educators rather than tearing down standards. The hosts and interviewees look

at the current state of American education constructively, discussing its complexities and ways that it can be altered to meet the unique needs of each individual classroom.

In addition, I conducted an interview with former kindergarten teacher Leah Oles to get a sense of the current situation in kindergarten education. Oles provided valuable insights into what she experienced teaching kindergarten in two different decades, how she translated an increasingly academic curriculum into the classroom, and how her students were impacted. Overall, Oles had a positive response to the changes in teaching practices. Children in her class were still engaged in some of the activities found in a traditionally play-based classroom. Yet she noticed that incorporating academic learning through interactive tasks gave students more opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of ideas and skills. This enabled them to be more involved and take ownership of their learning success, while becoming better prepared for the rigorous curriculum of first grade.¹² I use Oles' experiences as an example of how play and academics can be successfully blended into a curriculum that is stimulating and effective.

The main theorists that have informed much of my thinking are Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget. Froebel established the first kindergarten in Germany in 1837 and laid the foundation for modern education based on the recognition that children have unique needs and capabilities. He understood that children are “inherently good-natured” and encouraged them to learn about the world around them through creative, imaginative, and spontaneous play.¹³ Froebel also laid the groundwork for the ideas of other prominent thinkers and theorists such as John Dewey. Dewey is considered the father of modern education and

¹² Leah Oles, Personal Interview, October 4, 2020.

¹³ Kat Eschner, “A Little History of American Kindergartens,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/little-history-american-kindergartens-180963263/>.

posited that children should interact with their environment in meaningful ways.¹⁴ He emphasized a progressive, hands-on, and child-centered approach, which has stood the test of time despite sweeping educational reforms.

Another theorist who has contributed to my research is Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist who examined the influences of social and cultural factors on children's knowledge construction and cognitive development. He also recognized play as a major source of development.¹⁵ Like Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, explored how children construct knowledge, recognizing play as an "important construct necessary for cognitive growth and development."¹⁶ Despite their differences, Vygotsky and Piaget agreed that children are active in the construction of their own knowledge and helped shape play-based learning through their individual theoretical frameworks.¹⁷ Ultimately, all of these thinkers contributed groundbreaking ideas to the field of education surrounding play-based and hands-on learning, and have influenced my understanding of why these practices are still relevant.

Synopsis of Literature

The scholarship on kindergarten education can best be understood from two perspectives: developmentalists and academics. These two opposing camps emerged around the middle of the twentieth century in response to the addition of kindergarten to public elementary schools in the early twentieth century, and its growing popularity since. Research scientist Jennifer Lin Russell

¹⁴ Amy Seely Flint, *Literate Lives: Teaching Reading and Writing in Elementary Classrooms* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 85.

¹⁵ Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell, *Reading, Writing, and Talk: Inclusive Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, K-2* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2016), 70.

¹⁶ Meghan Elizabeth Taylor and Wanda Boyer, "Play-Based Learning: Evidence-Based Research to Improve Children's Learning Experiences in the Kindergarten Classroom," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 48 (March 2020): 127.

¹⁷ Flint, *Literate Lives*, 84.

highlights the evolving logics of kindergarten, particularly surrounding the qualitatively different ways that kindergarten has been described and portrayed in “media accounts, state guidelines, and visions of legitimate professional practice.”¹⁸ Over the last few decades leading up to the early 2000s, Russell noticed an increasingly academic shift in the narrative and images of kindergarten promoted by these outlets, which is reflected in much of my research.¹⁹

Regarding kindergarten’s purpose, developmentalist thought embraces a model centered around free play and focuses on the child’s social, emotional, and moral development.²⁰ This form of kindergarten education took priority in curricula and practices across American classrooms all the way up until the shift noted by Russell. Researchers Michael H. Little and Lora Cohen-Vogel list some of the key characteristics of the developmentalist model: the transition to the formal school environment by focusing on social and behavioral skills necessary for school success; student-directed and hands-on activities with lots of child discretion; a strong emphasis on social and emotional development; use of manipulatives and concrete materials, learning centers, and free play; and a formative nature of assessments focused on observation of student behavior and work products.²¹ These are all features that align with my perspective on what should be incorporated in the kindergarten classroom. The hands-on nature and focus on socio-emotional development are particularly appealing, as these approaches have been shown by countless studies to benefit children throughout their elementary years.

¹⁸ Jennifer Lin Russell, “From Child’s Garden to Academic Press: The Role of Shifting Institutional Logics in Redefining Kindergarten Education,” *American Educational Research Association* 48 (April 2011): 244.

¹⁹ Russell, “From Child’s Garden to Academic Press,” 244.

²⁰ Russell, “From Child’s Garden to Academic Press,” 237-248.

²¹ Michael H. Little and Lora Cohen-Vogel, “Too Much Too Soon? An Analysis of the Discourses Used by Policy Advocates in the Debate over Kindergarten,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24 (October 2016): 11.

One component of the developmentalist framework recognized by Little and Cohen-Vogel that concerns me, however, is “limited exposure to academic content.”²² As I argue later, young children entering the contemporary kindergarten are much more prepared to tackle developmentally appropriate academic content, as long as it is introduced to them in the right ways. Kindergartners should not be shielded from academic material, but rather it should be integrated into the play-based practices suggested by developmentalists. On that note, scholars on the academics side differ from developmentalists in their recommendation for “academic preparation and the forging curricular and pedagogical connections between kindergarten and the primary grades.”²³ In the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of academics in kindergarten became a contentious subject, especially regarding the topic of readiness. Russell links the rise of this issue to parents portrayed in the media advancing academic logic in an attempt to accelerate their children’s learning (and thus presumably their future success). Although the developmentalist argument remained salient during this period, it was not long before the academic perspective took hold and, eventually, precedence.²⁴

Some of the features of the academic model pushed by scholars are to prepare students with the necessary skills and knowledge needed for success in school; teacher-directed activities; the acquisition of basic academic skills, with an emphasis on early numeracy and literacy skills; the inclusion of abstract materials such as worksheets and flashcards; and formal assessment procedures to ensure school readiness.²⁵ To reiterate, I support incorporating basic academic concepts into the kindergarten curriculum, and even more advanced content if children are ready for it. Where academics lose me, though, is in their discussion of worksheets, flashcards, and

²² Little and Cohen-Vogel, “Too Much Too Soon?,” 11.

²³ Russell, “From Child’s Garden to Academic Press,” 248.

²⁴ Russell, “From Child’s Garden to Academic Press,” 249.

²⁵ Little and Cohen-Vogel, “Too Much Too Soon?,” 11.

didactic instructional activities. These are fine when used in moderation at the kindergarten level but should not be prioritized and used as the primary means to educate young children. My research indicates that hands-on, child-centered learning through play is more productive, and for that reason I side more with the developmentalist scholars. That said, academic scholars do offer valuable ideas that can and should be blended with play-based practices to give students motivating and challenging educational experiences.

Why I Care (and You Should Too)

The main reason I am drawn to this topic is because, as an Education major who wants to teach kindergarten at some point, I feel the need to learn more about the changes that have taken place over the past few decades. I want to know what I am getting myself into, along with the challenges that come with teaching in this new era of schooling. I am interested in seeing how other educators have adapted to these groundbreaking academic shifts, and how students are impacted everyday by the decisions that their teachers make surrounding standards and curricula. But most of all, I want to get a picture of what is *not* working in the kindergarten classroom. I want to understand why many students are no longer engaged, fall behind in social-emotional development, lack critical thinking skills, and do not know how to participate in play, as noted throughout much of my research. This last part concerns me because the practice of play has been considered “child’s work” by many, including Vivian Paley, who wrote a book on this subject. The notion that play is the ideal pedagogy through which children learn has been stressed again and again by experts. And yet the practice of play has largely taken on a negative connotation within the world of elementary education. As a result, it has been drastically reduced

in many kindergarten classrooms, or removed altogether. This is a problem, for children and the future of American culture, and thus it is a subject that should concern all of us.

Part II: Conception and Evolution of “The Children’s Garden”

Froebel’s Kindergarten: From Germany to America

To learn how the contemporary kindergarten came to fruition, it is necessary to understand the ideals on which it was founded. German educator Friedrich Froebel opened the first kindergarten in Germany in the late 1830s. Its purpose was not only to reform preschool education, but through it the traditional family structure and child-rearing practices. Froebel was one of the first educational thinkers to suggest removing children from the home into a public institution, justifying this revolutionary idea as “the only effective basis for training for citizenship.”²⁶ In an attempt to strike a compromise between home-centered (the preferred method by Germans at the time) and institutional child-rearing, Froebel limited sessions to just a couple hours a day to supplement the family. In effect, as German historian Ann Taylor Allen puts it, “The philosophical basis of the kindergarten movement indicates the centrality of issues involving the relationship of public and private spheres, and of the individual to society.”²⁷

Some of the chief aspects of the Froebelian kindergarten include the importance of the child, self-activity as the basis of instruction, drawing on the child’s natural interests, the study of nature as the primary means of instruction, constructive work, and, most significantly, play.²⁸ This method represented a substantial shift away from the previous societal notion, which

²⁶ Ann Taylor Allen, “‘Let Us Live with Our Children’: Kindergarten Movements in Germany and the United States, 1840-1914,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1988): 25.

²⁷ Allen, “Let Us Live with Our Children,” 25.

²⁸ Meike Sophia Baader, “Froebel and the Rise of Educational Theory in the United States,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23 (September 2004): 431.

stressed that play was a waste of time and that children's innate curiosities should be tamed for the purpose of productivity.²⁹ Within the Froebelian kindergarten, children were given toys that "symbolically represented the relationship of the individual to the whole, and of diversity to harmony."³⁰ Continuing his emphasis on individual self-expression and cooperation with others, Froebel argued that children should be taught through music, nature study, dramatic play, and stories. In addition, he encouraged the use of crafts and manipulatives to learn, promoted the idea of circle time for children to learn in a group, and nurtured the acquisition of cognitive and social skills through children's "natural curiosity and desire to learn."³¹ Froebel also believed that women were best suited to run these kindergartens because they were adept at working with young children and developing their emotional skills.³² He thought that women possessed the maternal qualities that traditional paternal authority lacked to discipline children in a nurturing way.³³

The kindergarten movement eventually arrived in the United States, brought over in the mid-nineteenth century by liberal German exiles who sought to uphold Froebelian ideals despite the condemnation of kindergartens in Germany as "centers of atheism and political subversion."³⁴ It was not until 1860, however, that American educator Elizabeth Peabody established the first formal English-speaking kindergarten in the United States. Peabody learned about kindergarten through an article published about Froebel and was drawn to his emphasis on the power of kindergarten to nurture the moral and spiritual development of children through

²⁹ Angele Sancho Passe, "A Brief History of Kindergarten," in *Is Everybody Ready for Kindergarten?: A Toolkit for Preparing Children and Families* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2010), 42.

³⁰ Allen, "Let Us Live with Our Children," 25.

³¹ Sancho Passe, "A Brief History of Kindergarten," 42.

³² Sancho Passe, "A Brief History of Kindergarten," 42.

³³ Allen, "Let Us Live with Our Children," 25.

³⁴ Allen, "Let Us Live with Our Children," 27.

“play, gardening, and group songs and games.”³⁵ When she opened her own kindergarten in Boston, children were taught reading and writing and incorporated elements from nature into their learning, such as gardening and tending to animals. As former professor of early childhood education Patricia Cantor notes, “Peabody claimed that kindergarten provided support for mothers, while helping children develop important social skills and love of others.”³⁶ Throughout her career, Peabody advocated for kindergartens and more training schools for teachers. Within her lifetime, Peabody observed the kindergarten movement achieve great success. It would continue to thrive.³⁷

The kindergarten was more popular in the U.S. than in Germany because of the growing need for an institution that would promote social cooperation within an increasingly progressive, heterogeneous, immigrant society. While the Froebelian kindergarten emphasized self-activity and the individual, there was also a focus on the social perspective in which children interact with other children of varying backgrounds and learn from each other.³⁸ The challenges of a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse society combined with the perceived need for integration and assimilation underscores the rapid ascendancy of kindergarten in America. Kindergarten was often considered a “society of children” or a “child republic,” providing an excellent microcosm for molding children into citizens who would uphold democratic American values.³⁹ Allen successfully sums this up: “Our examples have suggested that the greater acceptance of the kindergarten in America reflected a different vision of social order which aimed not to preserve the private sphere but to open it up to the values of citizenship, social

³⁵ Patricia Cantor, “Elizabeth Peabody: America’s Kindergarten Pioneer,” *YC Young Children* 68 (May 2013): 92.

³⁶ Cantor, “Elizabeth Peabody,” 93.

³⁷ Cantor, “Elizabeth Peabody,” 93.

³⁸ Baader, “Froebel and the Rise of Educational Theory,” 440.

³⁹ Baader, “Froebel and the Rise of Educational Theory,” 438.

responsibility, and assimilation.”⁴⁰ Rather than viewing the child’s removal from the domestic sphere as an attempt to break the family apart, many Americans perceived educating the young, kindergarten-aged child outside the home as necessary to the preservation of social and political order.⁴¹

Mission in Progress

Kindergarten continued to gain momentum throughout the Progressive era, even extending its reach beyond the children within the system. The institution began to take on a social reform mission, tasked with shaping the whole child into a moral, healthy, and hard-working citizen while simultaneously providing assistance to the broader community. Education historian Larry Cuban describes kindergarten’s multifaceted mission as one that sought to “rescue children and their parents from poverty and crime, turn non-English speaking immigrants into Americans, uplift illiterate and unskilled blacks, build solid citizens and industrious workers, and relax the unbending uniformity of elementary schooling.”⁴² Teachers would extend their outreach to help families by providing classes and carrying out what would eventually become known as social work. Although the social reform mission was short-lived with the eventual integration of kindergartens into public school systems, the legacy of the learning that occurred within the four walls would carry on for decades. Specifically, practices such as learning by doing, collaboration, and learning through play were approaches that appealed to educators and experts alike.⁴³

⁴⁰ Allen, “Let Us Live with Our Children,” 48.

⁴¹ Allen, “Let Us Live with Our Children,” 48.

⁴² Larry Cuban, “Why Some Reforms Last: The Case of the Kindergarten,” *American Journal of Education* 100 (February 1992): 175-176.

⁴³ Cuban, “Why Some Reforms Last,” 176.

However, despite the predominance of these practices and pedagogies, the influence of academic pressures started to appear with the introduction of kindergartens into public schools and the eventual institutionalization of kindergarten by the 1930s.⁴⁴ The need to prepare students for first grade was just one pressure that resulted from placing kindergartners in the public school system. Kindergarten's new mission was adjusted to account for this development, as well as other impulses such as individual development, social adjustment to schooling, and reforming society. Regardless, the developmentalist focus on the "whole child" and the "child-centered" curriculum prevailed, particularly under John Dewey's influence. As Cuban asserts, "Harnesses to John Dewey's ideas of social learning, the developmentalist perspective incorporated group learning and cooperation as essential to a democratic society."⁴⁵

New Pedagogy in Town

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, developmentalist pedagogy triumphed within the classroom, though the creeping influence of academic theory became more visible. For example, the 1960s brought a wave of controversy over whether children should be taught to read in kindergarten. One question that experts and politicians asked that set the tone of the ongoing debate is whether developmentally oriented kindergarten was a waste of time in a child's academic career, or whether it was "a way of preserving a vision of childhood lost in industrial society."⁴⁶ This dispute surrounding what public school kindergartners should be doing with their time did not dissipate or end, especially as kindergartens continued to grow to the

⁴⁴ Cuban, "Why Some Reforms Last" 188.

⁴⁵ Cuban, "Why Some Reforms Last," 181.

⁴⁶ Kristen Dombkowski, "Will the Real Kindergarten Please Stand Up?: Defining and Redefining the Twentieth-Century US Kindergarten," *History of Education* 30 (November 2001): 537.

point where, in the 1990s, 98% of U.S. first- and second-graders had attended kindergarten. Kindergarten had gone from being a privilege to a right, and in some places a legal requirement.⁴⁷ When the U.S. began to fall behind other countries in academic achievement, and parents demanded more academic training, and as administrators felt the pressure to “beef up” the kindergarten curriculum, it became clear that academics would prevail as the answer to how kindergartners should be spending their time. Enter “A Nation at Risk,” a landmark 1983 report conducted by a presidential commission of corporate and public leaders and educators.⁴⁸

This report solidified national concerns that American public schools were failing, linking mediocre student performance on national and international tests to mediocre economic performance on the global scale. Following the publication of “A Nation at Risk,” an academic pushdown was visible through the addition of more tests, an increase in graduation requirements, and a lengthened school year.⁴⁹ Authors Sarah Mondale and Sarah B. Patton declare, “Once-flourishing progressive classroom approaches such as portfolios, project-based teaching, and performance-based testing that blossomed between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for example, have since shriveled under the unrelenting pressure for higher test scores.”⁵⁰ Consequently, kindergartens became increasingly academic to prepare students for the rigors of primary school, and many teachers were and remain forced to adopt practices that they find developmentally inappropriate.

Signed into law in 2001 during the George W. Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind Act only solidified this push for standards-based education reform, directly targeting

⁴⁷ Dombkowski, “Will the Real Kindergarten Please Stand Up?,” 539.

⁴⁸ Sarah Mondale and Sarah B. Patton, *School: The Story of American Public Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 177.

⁴⁹ Mondale and Patton, *School*, 177.

⁵⁰ Mondale and Patton, *School*, 180.

students in the early elementary years. With the lofty goal of having children reading on grade level by the end of third grade, this piece of legislation resulted in a stronger emphasis on reading in the early grades, increased accountability for schools and measures for states, and more parental choice in the process of selecting schools.⁵¹ While this goal may seem worthwhile, it has been staunchly criticized and regarded by some as a “failure” for its prioritization of standardized tests throughout all grade levels, constraints on teacher discretion, and pressure to implement a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum.⁵² The goal for greater reading comprehension reinforced by inflated test scores is also reflective of the larger culture of competition embedded within and beyond American society. Policymakers understand that the American education system, once praised as the standard for excellence, has fallen far behind those of other countries. Even worse, the system is failing to meet the needs of its own students. Mondale and Patton accurately note that over the past few decades, the changes that have taken place within classrooms reflect “fear of foreign competition and fiercely held beliefs that education harnessed to the economy will strengthen the nation’s global competitive position.”⁵³ But what has emerged from this new uniform, corporate-influenced single model of good teaching and good schools? According to the evidence (which is sparse), not much.⁵⁴

Many early childhood professionals have warned educators about the dangers of overly academic approaches in kindergarten, but that is exactly the direction in which kindergarten education has moved over the past few decades. Historian Kristen Dombkowski notes that “the growing emphasis on school effectiveness and accountability was accompanied by increased

⁵¹ Flint, *Literate Lives*, 19.

⁵² Flint, *Literate Lives*, 19.

⁵³ Mondale and Patton, *School*, 181.

⁵⁴ Mondale and Patton, *School*, 181.

high-stakes testing of kindergarten readiness and early grades performance.”⁵⁵ As a result, academic frustration and defeat experienced by kindergartners could translate into failure throughout the rest of their school careers. It is also possible that academic pressures could rob these students of some of childhood’s joy.⁵⁶ Dombkowski asks an important question that promoters of rigid academics should consider: “If the child was, after all, to be at the centre [sic] of kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy, and every child had unique needs and interests, how could there be a standardized or even a predictable or efficient means of structuring the kindergarten as a year of pre-primary education?”⁵⁷ This new standardized and uniform method of teaching and experiencing kindergarten contradicts everything we know about the value of child-centered, hands-on, and play-based learning. Instead of exploring their environment, kindergartners now navigate the consequences of not meeting standards that are taught through teacher-centered instruction and textbooks.

Part III: What’s Happening Today

The New First Grade?

Today, as more children enter kindergarten with prior out-of-home experiences, these students are facing an academic trickle-down that has virtually uprooted play as the central focus within many classrooms. With kindergartens transitioning to a more structured elementary school model, the classroom itself, once a place of “noisy activity, music, and artistry,” has become a zone of silence with a heavy emphasis placed on skill-and-drill instruction.⁵⁸ Rather

⁵⁵ Dombkowski, “Will the Real Kindergarten Please Stand Up?,” 542.

⁵⁶ Dombkowski, “Will the Real Kindergarten Please Stand Up?,” 542.

⁵⁷ Dombkowski, “Will the Real Kindergarten Please Stand Up?,” 531.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Graue, “What’s Going on in the Children’s Garden? Kindergarten Today,” *Young Children* 56 (May 2001): 67.

than enriching students with content from a multitude of areas such as music, art, science, social studies, and world languages, these subjects have all taken a backseat to what is considered the pinnacle of elementary education: mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA). Since students are tested in math and ELA skills beginning in the third grade, these two subjects have become the center of attention for teachers trying to prepare students for standardized testing.

In particular, reading, which was once considered a “first grade skill,” is now being taught to kindergartners right as they walk through the door. Journalist Daniel de Vise reports that in Montgomery County, Maryland, in 2007, the percentage of kindergarten readers had more than doubled in just five years. Although he notes a lack of statistics indicating how many students were reading when they exited kindergarten nationwide, it is fair to assume that this trend is not limited to Montgomery County schools.⁵⁹ According to journalist and veteran kindergarten teacher Valerie Strauss, “Things have gotten to such a point that children who leave kindergarten without having learned to read are often considered failures.”⁶⁰ Don’t get me wrong. Kindergartners and young children should be exposed to many different kinds of texts from various genres, authors, and backgrounds. And there are certainly some students who enter kindergarten ready to read right off the bat. However, pushing young children to read who are not ready could potentially prevent them from developing a love for reading and cause them to struggle with literacy development throughout their formal education. Additionally, if there is no scientific evidence suggesting that early instruction produces better readers in the long run, why are we prioritizing a practice that is not developmentally appropriate for all students?⁶¹

⁵⁹ Daniel de Vise, “More Work, Less Play in Kindergarten,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/22/AR2007052201696.html>.

⁶⁰ Strauss, “Kindergarten Teacher.”

⁶¹ Meyers, “What’s Wrong with Kindergarten in America.”

Alternatively, Strauss suggests we should be teaching kindergartners letters, sounds, and pre-reading skills to give them the foundation to develop more proficient reading abilities in first and second grade.⁶² Rather than causing students undue confusion, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy if they are not yet experienced readers, we can give them the tools they will eventually need to be competent readers.⁶³ And if students are ahead of the game, this is when differentiated learning comes into play. Some students could be working with the teacher focusing specifically on these pre-reading skills, while others who are prepared and have already developed these skills can begin the process of reading independently, with their peers, or with another adult present in the classroom. Providing students with different challenges and opportunities that cater to their unique skill levels is what teachers should be striving for, especially surrounding literacy and ELA within the kindergarten classroom. Unfortunately, this task is difficult within our current one-size-fits-all educational climate.

Despite decades of research that concludes that kindergarten-age children learn best through action-based, hands-on activities that engage the five senses, some people and school systems continue to push practices that are counterproductive and ineffective.⁶⁴ A few of the practices that Strauss mentions, in addition to reading too early, include writing too soon, making students sit still for long periods of time, and preventing students from engaging in activities that are essential to healthy development because of an overwhelming amount of time spent on academic instruction.⁶⁵ Young children need to move around, explore their environment, engage in creative thinking driven by their innate curiosities, and most importantly, play. However, with No Child Left Behind increasing the pressure for schools to prepare children for testing, the

⁶² Strauss, “Kindergarten Teacher.”

⁶³ Meyers, “What’s Wrong with Kindergarten in America.”

⁶⁴ Strauss, “Kindergarten Teacher.”

⁶⁵ Strauss, “Kindergarten Teacher.”

block area and dress-up center have been eradicated in many classrooms to make room for rigorous, hands-off instruction. Curwood contends, “By beginning the first-grade reading curriculum in kindergarten, schools have effectively gained an extra year of instruction.”⁶⁶ But at what price?

More Than Just a Number

All of this academic instruction comes at a cost. Aside from a significant reduction in time spent on subjects outside of math and ELA, standardized instruction and narrow content matter leave little room for the development of skills such as self-reliance, problem-solving, and spatial thinking. Kindergarten teacher Anne Stoudt declares, “While young students’ reading and math scores are soaring, there is little assessment of the effect of intensified academic focus on kids’ motivation to learn, creativity, motor skills, social skills, or self-esteem.”⁶⁷ Children are being defined by the numbers they achieve rather than the unique qualities that they bring to the classroom. Additionally, we are creating an environment in which children risk academic burnout by the time they reach third grade. This has potentially dangerous repercussions for years to come.⁶⁸

Children are more than just numerical values and deserve to be taught content that is not shoved into a one-size-fits-all curriculum that ignores individual differences, curiosities, and interests. Meanwhile, materials such as play kitchens, easels, and puppet theaters that spark imagination have a place within the classroom and do not warrant removal.⁶⁹ The alarming physical and curricular transitions occurring within kindergarten classrooms across the country

⁶⁶ Curwood, “What Happened to Kindergarten?”

⁶⁷ Quoted in Jen Scott Curwood, “What Happened to Kindergarten?”

⁶⁸ Jen Scott Curwood, “What Happened to Kindergarten?”

⁶⁹ Meyers, “What’s Wrong with Kindergarten in America.”

contradict what we know about how young children learn, and yet this seems to be the new reality of kindergarten education (at least for now). Recent data that has been collected in kindergarten classrooms and interviews conducted with educators and experts across the field only reaffirm what we are seeing today.

Part IV: Evidence of the Shift to Academics

A Decade of Transformation

One influential paper, “Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?” by Education Studies scholars Daphna Bassok, Scott Latham, and Anna Rorem, compared public school kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 using two large, nationally representative data sets.⁷⁰ Their findings confirm a major point of contention among parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers: academic content might crowd out other imperative types of learning experiences that assist the development of social and regulation skills or foster physical and mental health, both of which are predictors of children’s long-term outcomes.⁷¹ One interesting point to note is that, during the periods examined in this study, beliefs about the importance of academics increased more than beliefs in other areas. However, kindergarten teachers still placed a heavy emphasis on readiness skills such as self-regulation and social interaction.⁷² Based on this discovery, one has to ask if teachers now have more on their plates with balancing school readiness and intensified academic content. Additionally, if teachers have largely maintained the same regard for social skills and other skills deemed by some as “non-academic,” are these teachers showing any resistance to rigid academic instruction within the classroom?

⁷⁰ Daphna Bassok, Scott Latham, and Anna Rorem, “Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?,” *AERA Open* 1 (January-March 2016): 1.

⁷¹ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 1.

⁷² Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 6.

Unfortunately, the study did find substantial decreases in the time spent on “non-academic” subjects such as music, art, dance, theater, and foreign language instruction that have the potential to foster interaction and social competence.⁷³ I mentioned earlier that these changes align with a heavier focus on literacy and math skills in kindergarten, with “particularly pronounced increases in more advanced tasks.”⁷⁴ Moreover, accompanying drops in exposure to subjects outside of math and ELA are changes away from hands-on or exploratory approaches to learning. According to the research, daily use of textbooks in kindergarten more than doubled for reading and math, while worksheets also made an even greater appearance.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the contemporary results-oriented kindergarten culture is evident in teachers placing increased importance on children’s performance in relation to local, state, or professional standards, as well as their classmates.⁷⁶ So, what does all this mean?

Within the span of a decade, we have witnessed substantial shifts in the pedagogical approaches to kindergarten instruction. Bassok, Latham, and Rorem note a heightened focus on literacy and math instruction in conjunction with drops in child-selected activities and increases in teacher-directed instruction.⁷⁷ While there is evidence that exposure to academic content in kindergarten can be beneficial for student learning, studies have also found that an amplified focus on academics may be stressful for children and negatively impact their self-confidence, motivation, and overall outlook on school.⁷⁸ Further, as mentioned in the authors’ discussion, “developmental scientists agree that there are ways to meaningfully engage young children in literacy and math learning and that the effectiveness of such efforts depends on the pedagogical

⁷³ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 6.

⁷⁴ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 7.

⁷⁵ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 9.

⁷⁶ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 10.

⁷⁷ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 14.

⁷⁸ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 15.

approach, the quality of teaching, and the connection of the instruction to young children's curiosity."⁷⁹ However, the shifts in teaching practices and coverage of content areas that can be seen in this study and in the actual kindergarten classroom are far from meaningful.

Young children are best engaged through movement and experiential learning, as opposed to textbooks, workbooks, and worksheets. Many kindergartners today are capable of handling academic content. However, if this content is not introduced to them in a developmentally appropriate way, then we risk causing academic exhaustion instead of attracting them to the joys of learning. If we envision educators as salespeople trying to provide an appealing pitch for all that school has to offer, they are failing miserably in many kindergarten classrooms. Professor and former kindergarten teacher Elizabeth Graue claims that kindergarten's purpose is to build on children's experiences, needs, and interests in a way that will enhance all domains of development, not to "squeeze the life out of kindergarten to cram the content required by the state's 3rd-grade test."⁸⁰ After all, many of these children are only five years old.

Pre-packaged and High Stakes

Another prominent report questioning the stifling of play within kindergarten classrooms is *Crisis in the Kindergarten* written by Edward Miller and Joan Almon. Miller (a founding partner of the U.S. Alliance for Childhood) and Almon (a former Waldorf early childhood educator and the Executive Director of the Alliance for Childhood) criticize highly prescriptive

⁷⁹ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, "New First Grade?," 15.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Graue, "Reimagining Kindergarten: Restoring a Developmental Approach When Accountability Demands Are Pushing Formal Instruction on the Youngest Learners," *School Administrator* 66 (November 2009): 10-15.

curricula and argue that child-initiated play must be restored to schools.⁸¹ While their report from the Alliance for Childhood is biased against academic pedagogy and is even a bit hyperbolic at times, Miller and Almon do make some important claims that should be considered when evaluating the well-being and long-term success of students. For example, they label academic standards as “inappropriate expectations,” which I do not think is a fair or accurate evaluation of the standards. That said, Miller and Almon correctly assert that many kindergartners are denied the benefits of play, which can be a major stress reliever.⁸² They also list many of the advantages that socio-dramatic play has to offer young children, including greater language skills, better social skills, and more imagination, empathy, and self-control than children who are not exposed to play.⁸³ Though it may appear that Miller and Almon overhype the importance play, the benefits that they list are not outrageous and can be seen across a number of studies conducted over the past several decades.

Their report also highlights three studies that were supported by the Alliance for Childhood, a developmentalist-leaning organization, that indicate a substantial reduction of play in public kindergartens in support of lengthy lessons and standardized testing.⁸⁴ Within the kindergartens studied in New York City and Los Angeles, standardized testing and tests were a daily activity. Simultaneously, classic play materials including blocks, sand and water tables, and props for dramatic play had largely disappeared.⁸⁵ These findings are consistent with the data presented in “Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?” surrounding play materials and testing. Bassok, Latham, and Rorem note that during the period studied, “the likelihood of offering a

⁸¹ Edward Miller and Joan Almon: *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* (College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood, 2009), 1.

⁸² Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 3.

⁸³ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 2.

⁸⁴ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 2.

⁸⁵ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 3.

dramatic play area, a science or nature area, or a water or sand table each dropped by over 20 percentage points.”⁸⁶ Meanwhile, they document striking increases in the use of standardized tests in early elementary classrooms. According to the scholars, “In 2010, roughly 30% of public-school kindergarten teachers reported using standardized tests at least once a month.”⁸⁷

Recent scholarship has linked standardized testing and accountability to the intensification of academic practices over the past few decades.⁸⁸ However, high-stakes testing at the kindergarten level can be frustrating and damaging to young children’s self-esteem and will to learn. Miller and Almon contend that most tests with children under age eight are of “questionable validity and can lead to harmful labeling.”⁸⁹ They may take less time and are often considered more efficient, but issues of equity, age appropriateness, and the underlying motives behind standardized testing stifle the justifiability of these tests. In addition, critical thinking skills and creativity promoted by play-based materials are shoved to the side to make room for inauthentic, prescriptive curricula and test preparation. This comes at a cost to the students who are subjected to these rigid and often discouraging practices. Think about it: what would your impression of the education system be if you were forced to prepare for and take standardized tests that are highly influential in decisions about promotion, retention, and placement at the tender age of five?⁹⁰ In kindergarten, I was just learning how to tie my shoes. The expectations placed on kindergartners now regarding testing are unimaginable and do not foster a positive outlook on learning. If we are trying to hook kindergartners on the idea of school and get them excited for the educational experiences that are yet to come, we are not off to a great start.

⁸⁶ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 9.

⁸⁷ Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, “New First Grade?,” 14.

⁸⁸ Russell, “From Child’s Garden to Academic Press,” 237.

⁸⁹ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 3.

⁹⁰ Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, 3.

Part V: How Bad Could It Really Be?

Teachers Throwing in the Towel

Many kindergarten teachers have come forward to express grievances about their students' learning. Some of the problematic practices that have become dominant in some classrooms include students sitting at desks all day, educators not teaching important critical thinking skills or encouraging discovery and curiosity, hands-off and teacher-centered instruction, and a lack of collaboration among students. The author of *Free to Learn* (2013), scholar Peter Gray notes that academic training in kindergarten has no long-term benefit. Although academic practices slightly increase test scores in first grade, studies have found that the benefit is lost by third grade, and students who are subjected to academic kindergartens do not fare as well academically, socially, or emotionally as their play-based counterparts by fourth.⁹¹ There are certainly some parents and teachers who are in support of this shift, but possibly the most potent proponents of academic work in the kindergarten classroom are politicians, most of whom know very little about the educational needs of young children. Gray asserts that politicians who make education policy and administrators who enforce it “know little about children or learning, and don’t pay attention to the two groups of people who do: those who conduct research on child development, and the teachers who see directly how the policies affect children.”⁹² Educational policies and protocols are being designed by lawmakers who likely could not even fill out a full-length lesson plan. What do they know about best practices within elementary education?

⁹¹ Peter Gray, “Kindergarten Teachers Speak Out for Children’s Happiness,” *Psychology Today*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201911/kindergarten-teachers-speak-out-children-s-happiness>.

⁹² Gray, “Kindergarten Teachers Speak Out.”

Forced to adhere to curricula they know has little value to their students, many talented teachers have chosen to leave the field entirely. Gray goes as far as linking the outrageous demands imposed on kindergarten teachers to abuse. This term may be extreme, but it is evident that kindergarten teachers must go to great lengths to ensure that their students are academically trained, and many are forced to abandon what they believe and know is right.⁹³ In his article, Gray includes anecdotes from kindergarten teachers expressing their frustrations with the current system. One unnamed teacher, who had been in the field for thirteen years when the article was written, noticed that pushing their students to read caused a significant amount of stress. This person testifies, “I’ve seen a rise in anxiety in my kids, avoidance of tasks that are ‘too hard,’ and some pretty impressive breakdowns or meltdowns. I’ve also seen a drop in executive function, imagination, and ability to sit still and focus... who knew five- and six-year-olds could burn out?”⁹⁴ Teachers did and do.

Another kindergarten teacher asserts that students are being thrown into a structured environment that requires them to absorb information in a robotic manner: “They have to sit for extended periods of time (even adults find that hard), they have to use ‘brain’ power without the aid of free movement to stave off boredom. They are not required to use their imaginations or ask questions that stimulate interaction with teachers and peers.”⁹⁵ The most noticeable trend among these comments, however, is that many kindergartners are now struggling with anxiety about school because of the overwhelming demands that they face on a daily basis. Hearing a kindergartner say, “I hate school” and “I am not good at anything” has to be discouraging for any

⁹³ Peter Gray, “Kindergarten Teachers Are Quitting, and Here Is Why,” *Psychology Today*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201912/kindergarten-teachers-are-quitting-and-here-is-why?page=1>.

⁹⁴ Gray, “Kindergarten Teachers Are Quitting.”

⁹⁵ Gray, “Kindergarten Teachers Are Quitting.”

parent or teacher. Kindergarten is a time to boost students' self-esteem and prepare them to face the exciting world of education that awaits them. If we cannot make kindergarten seem appealing, what does that mean for a future generation of students entering the system? Anxiety and fear surrounding learning that is instilled early on does not disappear as students become more academically competent. In fact, apprehension towards school can become even more rampant in the years that follow and leave everlasting impacts (and maybe even scars) on students' social-emotional well-being.⁹⁶

The Kids Will Be Alright? Yeah, Right

An article published by journalist Matt Barnum points to some new research claiming that as kindergarten classes become more academic, students will be “all right.”⁹⁷ The study Barnum cites, which was published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, may seem promising for advocates of academics within the kindergarten classroom. However, several flaws immediately stood out as I read this article. The most prominent issue is that this study appears to focus on the short-term ramifications on students. The study suggests that students in kindergarten classes with more academic content show higher reading and math ability, and that social-emotional metrics such as self-control, focus, and behavior are not impacted. Additionally, the researchers claim that challenging academic content is “not necessarily at odds with children's healthy development.”⁹⁸ The “sweeping” paper used data on nearly 20,000

⁹⁶ Gray, “Kindergarten Teachers Speak Out.”

⁹⁷ Matt Barnum, “Kindergarten Classes Are Getting More Academic. New Research Says the Kids Are All Right,” Chalkbeat, January 24, 2019, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2019/1/24/21106584/kindergarten-classes-are-getting-more-academic-new-research-says-the-kids-are-all-right>.

⁹⁸ Barnum, “Kindergarten Classes Are Getting More Academic.”

kindergartners across the country during the 2010-2011 school year.⁹⁹ But that is exactly the problem: one year of data does not define an entire academic career in which complications can later develop. While the study supposedly controls for outside factors, including poverty, prior academic skills, and parental education, it ignores how these students perform in the long-run.¹⁰⁰ I acknowledge that it is difficult to obtain long-term data due to the emerging relevance of this topic, but this study's failure to account for students' later academic achievement and social-emotional development hurts its credibility.

Another point in the research that is unsurprising to most people outside the field of education is that students in classrooms with a greater academic focus in language arts and math were more likely to earn higher test scores in each subject.¹⁰¹ Obviously, if students are being taught how to perform on tests rather than engaging in critical thinking skills, they are likely going to achieve better results. But what many people do not realize is that these results are inconsequential. Gray notes that these benefits disappear within a couple of years and can even be harmful to the development and social adjustment of these students. This study does not mention how these students perform on tests down the road and neglects the bigger picture of how these students progress through the rest of their educational journeys. This is yet another example of how this new research misses the mark by failing to address the long-term outcomes of a greater academic presence in kindergarten.

⁹⁹ Barnum, "Kindergarten Classes Are Getting More Academic."

¹⁰⁰ Barnum, "Kindergarten Classes Are Getting More Academic."

¹⁰¹ Barnum, "Kindergarten Classes Are Getting More Academic."

A Defective System

We might assume that this study was conducted by experts who champion the influence of academics in the kindergarten classroom. But how do the arguments from experts on the other side compare? The creators of the *Path to Learning* podcast work to uncover this perspective by interviewing teachers and education experts, shining a light on some of the forces preventing a return to play, and discussing ways to adapt the current system to better meet the needs of students in twenty-first-century America. The very first interview with Julie Wilson, president of the academic leadership group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and president and founder of the Institute for the Future of Learning, highlights the barriers we are up against with an outdated factory model system of education.¹⁰² This model, built for a fundamentally different era, favors memorization and recall and fails to engage and teach students skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving.¹⁰³ It reflects a time in American culture when students were viewed as an output of a standardized, uniform, and competitive system.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, not much has changed over the years with a nationwide push for global educational dominance dating back to the 1980s. Most alarmingly, however, is the prevalence of this ideological perspective in contemporary kindergartens.

Wilson asserts, “In my mind, any system that ignores what’s presented on a given day and leans on a standardized curriculum, we’re just not going to get far with that. So how can you ask a teacher to establish a learning environment where students can really dig into their

¹⁰² Julie Wilson, interview by John Pottenger, Jay Irwin, and Scott Bultman, “Do We Still Value What We Measure in Education?,” *Path to Learning*, podcast audio, March 17, 2020, <https://pathtolearning.us/podcast/whats-worth-learning/>.

¹⁰³ David Nurenberg, “Want to Scrap the ‘Factory Model’ Classroom? Mind These Common Pitfalls,” *Education Week*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/11/want-to-scrap-the-factory-model-classroom.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Flint, *Literate Lives*, 6.

creativity and to have that nurtured, if the teachers themselves aren't being asked to be creative?"¹⁰⁵ This is a question that needs to be considered by school administrators regarding all grade levels, but particularly kindergarten. If teachers are not given the autonomy to teach what they think is appropriate and cater to the individual needs of each student, then our kindergartners will fall victim to a dysfunctional and mechanized system that views them as mere data points. The kindergarten needs to be a microcosm of acceptance where children see themselves as valuable contributors to the classroom community. By giving kindergartners the freedom to explore their passions and take (safe, supervised) risks within their environment, they learn that the seemingly daunting world of education is something that might not be so big and scary after all.

Part VI: Reclaiming Play (While Incorporating Academics)

Play Theorized

After analyzing contemporary research, we know that play promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, concept formation, and creativity skills while enhancing social and emotional development.¹⁰⁶ But how did educational theorists start the conversation about play as a source of learning? According to scholars Meaghan Elizabeth Taylor and Wanda Boyer, the constructivist, socio-developmental, and sociocultural theories have influenced play-based learning and the way educators view children's learning and development.¹⁰⁷ Piaget perceived play as necessary for cognitive growth and development, which is echoed in his constructivist theory. Through constructivist learning, children "acquire concepts through active involvement

¹⁰⁵ Wilson, *Path to Learning*.

¹⁰⁶ Joan Moyer, "The Child-Centered Kindergarten: A Position Paper: Association for Childhood Education International," *Childhood Education* 77 (Spring 2001): 163.

¹⁰⁷ Taylor and Boyer, "Play-Based Learning," 127.

and interaction with their environment and construct their own knowledge through this exploration.”¹⁰⁸ The ability for children to inquire about and explore the world around them is one of the foundational pillars of play-based learning. Piaget is one of the most renowned educational theorists. He made remarkable contributions toward advancing the way we teach and understand children’s development. Therefore, his recognition that children construct knowledge and create meaning through play-based practices reinforces the validity of play as a fundamental educational pedagogy.

The socio-developmental and sociocultural theories promoted by Vygotsky highlight learning as an interactive process.¹⁰⁹ Similar to the explorative nature of Piaget’s constructivist theory, Vygotsky stressed the influence of classroom context and social interactions on student learning. The sociocultural theory in particular indicates that individual learning and development is heavily shaped by the individual’s surrounding culture, along with the interactions they participate in and observe.¹¹⁰ While these interactions may come across as frivolous, the process of learning to communicate is essential in helping children understand social norms such as turn-taking, transitions, and routines of conversations. Ultimately, these skills will enable students to be more successful in the classroom and, as pointed out by Taylor and Boyer, can be developed through collaborative group work and play.¹¹¹ Vygotsky’s work stressed the value of play within education and encouraged educators to provide opportunities for learning experiences rooted in play.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Taylor and Boyer, “Play-Based Learning,” 128.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor and Boyer, “Play-Based Learning,” 128.

¹¹⁰ Taylor and Boyer, “Play-Based Learning,” 128.

¹¹¹ Taylor and Boyer, “Play-Based Learning,” 132.

¹¹² Taylor and Boyer, “Play-Based Learning,” 128.

Think of the Children

Looking at the specific benefits of the play-based learning approach, one study conducted by researchers Deborah Stipek, Rachelle Feiler, Denise Daniels, and Sharon Milburn highlights the effects of child-centered instruction on young children's achievement and motivation. To summarize, they found that children in child-centered programs exuded more self-confidence in their academic abilities; had higher expectations for success; selected higher levels of difficulty on activities; displayed less dependency on adults for permission and approval; and evidenced more pride in their accomplishments.¹¹³ Meanwhile, children in programs with didactic instruction were found to have been significantly more worried about school than children in child-centered programs.¹¹⁴ The researchers suggest that children in didactic settings had more opportunities to fail, fostering "relatively negative cognitions about their competencies."¹¹⁵

As I have mentioned, young children should not associate school with feelings of anxiety and frustration. The fact of the matter is that some policymakers and administrators continue to push a performance-based system entrenched in competition that celebrates those who succeed, while alienating those who fall behind. Children should not fall behind in the first place, especially in kindergarten. If only a select number of students make it out of kindergarten confident and prepared to tackle academic challenges down the road, what does that say about our country's ability to educate children? Not much. If we are looking to motivate our young students and give them the tools that they need to take ownership over their learning, didactic instructional practices are clearly not the answer. One of the only benefits of didactic programs

¹¹³ Deborah Stipek, Rachelle Feiler, Denise Daniels, and Sharon Millburn, "Effects of Different Instructional Approaches on Young Children's Achievement and Motivation," *Wiley* 66 (February 1995): 216-220.

¹¹⁴ Stipek, et al., "Effects of Different Instructional Approaches," 218.

¹¹⁵ Stipek, et al., "Effects of Different Instructional Approaches," 220.

that the authors of this study point to is that children in these classrooms performed better on the letters and reading achievement test.¹¹⁶ Going back to the irrelevance of standardized testing, these assessments are short-lived and do not accurately define a student's aptitude or expertise.

While rigid academic instruction in kindergarten can improve children's ability to perform well on temporary reading tests, play is a means by which students build a foundation for the acquisition of lifelong skills, specifically in literacy. Today, we often stress the need to begin literacy instruction early, but what many people outside of education fail to recognize is that literacy is built on oral language. Oral language represents an introduction into the world of academia for children and, in combination with play, allows them to practice and experiment with language conventions. In particular, play facilitates oral language development through the need for students to negotiate rules and verbally express their needs and expectations.¹¹⁷ By creating an environment that encourages play and collaboration, children can comfortably express their ideas without fear of judgement or condemnation. In this environment, there are fewer risks for experimentation and children feel more supported by their peers and teachers.

Striking a Balance

With the introduction of the Common Core standards detailing what students should know in ELA, preparing students to read has become a dominant activity in many kindergarten classrooms. Many developmentalist proponents have taken issue with this increased presence of literacy instruction, denouncing the standards altogether. In a report attacking the introduction of reading in early childhood education, Joan Almon and fellow developmentalists Nancy Carlsson-Paige and GERALYN Bywater McLaughlin argue that under Common Core, the snowball of

¹¹⁶ Stipek, et al., "Effects of Different Instructional Approaches," 219.

¹¹⁷ Souto-Manning and Martell, *Reading, Writing, and Talk*, 72.

academic approaches has “escalated into an avalanche which threatens to destroy appropriate and effective approaches to early education.”¹¹⁸ I agree that the pressure of implementing standards has led some kindergarten teachers to turn to inappropriate didactic methods and frequent testing (particularly surrounding literacy), but I take the stance that the benchmarks, when applied correctly, do not hinder and can even promote student achievement.¹¹⁹ As mentioned by former inner-city public school teacher Robert Pondiscio, there is nothing in Common Core that prevents teachers from creating nurturing classrooms that are “play-based, engaging, and cognitively enriching.”¹²⁰ Ultimately, it is still possible to cultivate fun, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences for kindergartners while embedding enriching academic content.¹²¹

Former early elementary school teacher Leah Oles managed to accomplish this balance within her own classroom. Oles taught kindergarten her first year at Caroline Street Elementary School in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1987, and once again in her last year at the school in 2013. During the years in-between, she taught first grade at Caroline Street. Oles directly experienced the impacts of changing expectations and teaching practices to better prepare students for the primary grades. Within the physical structure of the classroom, Oles noted the significant reduction of space and materials allotted to play, including building materials and housekeeping equipment. Meanwhile, the amount of time spent on self-guided play was greatly

¹¹⁸ Nancy Carlsson-Paige, GERALYN Bywater McLaughlin, and Joan Wolfsheimer Almon, “Reading Instruction in Kindergarten: Little to Gain and Much to Lose,” *Alliance for Childhood and Defending the Early Years* (January 2015): 2.

¹¹⁹ Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, and Almon, “Reading Instruction in Kindergarten,” 2.

¹²⁰ Robert Pondiscio, “Is Common Core Too Hard for Kindergarten?,” *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*, February 11, 2015, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/common-core-too-hard-kindergarten>.

¹²¹ Daphna Bassok, Amy Claessens, and Mimi Engel, “The Case for the New Kindergarten: Challenging and Playful,” *Education Week*, June 3, 2014, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/06/04/33bassok_ep.h33.html.

reduced during her last year of teaching kindergarten. Oles asserts, “Now, the opportunities for social interaction, cooperation, and problem-solving skills are guided by the teacher while using materials that promote discovery and learning concepts.” Evidently, play was not eliminated from the classroom, but rather redirected to account for increased academic content and new learning materials.

Interestingly, Oles did not notice a lack of motivation toward academic-based learning activities. Children were encouraged to be active learners while engaging in games, songs, learning-center activities, and sharing with partners. Oles recognized that the practices of creating small group activities and utilizing learning stations were particularly helpful in guiding student learning and addressing the varied student skill levels. The children in Oles’ classroom were “highly successful in reaching the academic goals of the program.” The environment Oles cultivated during her last year of teaching represents a sharp transition from the highly competitive and standardized classrooms that were presented throughout much of my research. After studying the developmentalist perspective, I acknowledge that proponents have a tendency to promote a one-sided narrative while undermining the objectives and agenda of the other side. At the end of the day, their job is to convince their audience of the superiority and credibility of play within the classroom. However, Oles’ experiences highlight that compromise is not unreasonable. The integration of play-based practices within structured academic lessons that Oles was able to accomplish is what all kindergarten teachers should be striving for within the contemporary model of schooling.

Could Guided Play Be the Solution?

One specific practice that melds exploration and child autonomy with teacher-guided instruction is guided play. Guided play offers the best of both worlds in combining the child-directed nature of free play with a focus on learning outcomes and adult mentorship.¹²² Through guided play, “adult scaffolding focuses the child toward the pedagogical goal without usurping child autonomy. Allowing children to lead ensures that they are intrinsically motivated to learn.”¹²³ We are finally targeting that motivation piece that is missing in so many classrooms centered around didactic, hands-off instruction. When a student engages in an activity that aligns solely with what the teacher wants them to do, they may feel prodded and lose interest. But when we turn the tables and focus on keeping an activity engaging from the child’s point of view, they feel more involved and engrossed in the learning process.¹²⁴

Guided play is an appropriate method for young students because it supports children in the process of acquiring knowledge, while promoting engagement and fostering a positive mindset towards learning.¹²⁵ It can be particularly effective for literacy development within the kindergarten classroom. In one study that looked at literacy-rich guided play in kindergarten, students working in small groups were given materials to practice letter sounds and rhyming word families using either an assigned activity (control condition) or a student-invented game that practiced the same literacy concepts (experimental activity).¹²⁶ The students who were able

¹²² Deena Skolnick Weisberg, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Audrey K. Kittredge, and David Klahr, “Guided Play: Principles and Practices,” *Association for Psychological Science* 25 (June 2016): 177.

¹²³ Weisberg, et al., “Guided Play,” 178.

¹²⁴ Weisberg, et al., “Guided Play,” 178.

¹²⁵ Weisberg, et al., “Guided Play,” 179.

¹²⁶ Dena M. Cavanaugh, Kimberly J. Clemence, Mikaila M. Teale, Audrey C. Rule, and Sarah E. Montgomery, “Kindergarten Scores, Storytelling, Executive Function, and Motivation Improved through Literacy-Rich Guided Play,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 45 (November 2017): 831.

to construct their own games benefited academically by engaging in story-composing, sequencing ideas, applying new vocabulary, and practicing phonics and phonemic awareness skills.¹²⁷ The researchers also noted that the students were learning executive function and self-regulation skills as they negotiated the game aspects with one another, demonstrating how guided play can translate to growth across developmental domains. Most importantly, however, the teacher in the experimental activity classroom noticed that no students in this environment needed redirecting, and all were on-task with creating the literacy games. Some even requested to continue working during free-choice time, further suggesting the motivating and stimulating nature of guided play.¹²⁸

To appeal to the needs and pursuits of each individual child, we need to incorporate their interests into a hands-on, child-centered model that combines engaging play-based practices with enriching academic content. Guided play is just one way to empower students to invest in their learning early on and develop positive habits that will aid them in the process of becoming lifelong learners. I recognize that students today are entering the kindergarten classroom with more prior knowledge than ever before. Additionally, the Common Core standards have created a new level of accountability for student learning, but not necessarily in a negative way. Taking these points into consideration, I argue for a balance between play-based and academic pedagogy. The free-play model of kindergarten pushed by some developmentalists is outdated and does not accurately reflect the capabilities of this new generation of students. Guided play that facilitates academic learning in a fun and interactive way is more developmentally appropriate for today's kindergartners. The integration of academic content into the curriculum

¹²⁷ Cavanaugh, et al., "Kindergarten Scores, Storytelling, Executive Function, and Motivation Improved," 831.

¹²⁸ Cavanaugh, et al., "Kindergarten Scores, Storytelling, Executive Function, and Motivation Improved," 838-843.

also better prepares students for the rigors of first grade, as mentioned by Oles. However, before we can fret over whether kindergartners are ready to advance into the primary grades, we need to prioritize their emotional well-being and mental health. Kindergartners should never be pushed to the brink of exhaustion. Hearing the word “school” should not generate feelings of anxiety or inadequacy. If we wish to hook kindergartners on the idea of education, we first need to show them that we care about them as humans, not as outcomes of a performance-based system.

Part VII: Looking Ahead

The Resurgence of Play: From Washington to New York

For those like myself rooting for play to make a comeback in kindergarten classrooms, there is hope. Several kindergartens are making it a goal to transform the classroom into a more joyful and playful space for students, particularly in one Washington state school district.¹²⁹ Located 25 miles north of Seattle, the Pathfinder Kindergarten Center has built a classroom environment that mirrors high-quality preschools, with “artwork papering the walls, children playing gleefully on colorful carpets, and classroom shelves stocked with bins of toys.”¹³⁰ The school also offers multiple play areas, inside and outside, to offer children the opportunity to learn and burn off energy.¹³¹ The ability to learn through movement is important, as noted by developmental and cognitive psychologist Wendy L. Ostroff, because “children’s bodies, metabolisms, and bone structure are designed to be active all day.”¹³² By giving children the opportunity to move freely and incorporating kinesthetic experiences into lessons, we can better

¹²⁹ Jackie Mader, “How Play Is Making a Comeback in Kindergarten,” Hechinger Report, February 8, 2020, <https://hechingerreport.org/play-based-kindergarten-makes-a-comeback/>.

¹³⁰ Mader, “How Play Is Making a Comeback.”

¹³¹ Mader, “How Play Is Making a Comeback.”

¹³² Wendy L. Ostroff, ““Don’t Just Sit There... Pay Attention!,”” *Educational Leadership* 72 (October 2014): 70.

harness and direct student focus while encouraging children to be engrossed in the learning process.¹³³ Turning our attention back to Pathfinder, educators intended to design a kindergarten experience based on the basic needs of five-year-olds, rather than forcing them to fit the mold of the existing elementary school model. Their efforts have been relatively successful, with high rates of student progress and acknowledgment from first-grade teachers that these students are “better prepared” and “further along academically, socially, and emotionally.”¹³⁴

That’s not to say that we should abandon students’ academic needs, as cautioned by child development expert Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. Play should not just be stuck into the curriculum—it needs to be administered thoughtfully. Hirsh-Pasek recognizes that if the goal is for students to learn, adults need to set up an environment where children can “play with a purpose.”¹³⁵ Again, kindergartners in the twenty-first century are entering the system with a plethora of educational experiences and a greater capacity for academic comprehension than ever before. We need to provide them with learning experiences that are challenging and appropriate, while recognizing that they have a unique set of needs that differ from those of students in the primary grades. Academic content can and should be integrated into the curriculum, but it must be taught in fun and playful ways.

Meanwhile, here in New York, the Watertown school district has implemented a play-based learning curriculum for kindergartners and first-graders in its five elementary schools in an effort to “make learning more developmentally appropriate and to cultivate students’ social-emotional skills.”¹³⁶ Interestingly enough, New York state has adjusted its standards to

¹³³ Ostroff, “Don’t Just Sit There,” 73.

¹³⁴ Mader, “How Play Is Making a Comeback.”

¹³⁵ Mader, “How Play Is Making a Comeback.”

¹³⁶ Kate Stringer, “A New Push for Play-Based Learning: Why Districts Say It’s Leading to More Engaged Students, Collaborative Classmates... and Better Grades,” *The 74*, February 6,

encourage play and active, joyful engagement. The goal behind this shift was to revise the Common Core standards to ensure that students were learning the right skills at the appropriate grade level, and to prevent clashes between play and academic learning.¹³⁷ As a result, Watertown administrators were encouraged to bring more play into the classroom, and teachers were given materials that spark creativity and better align with the district's new objectives.¹³⁸ For example, as mentioned by journalist Kate Stringer, "A sports unit might involve passing around a soccer ball inscribed with letters and asking students to read a letter aloud and name words that start with that letter."¹³⁹ Students still spend a small portion of the day sitting at tables doing traditional work, which is imperative in developing basic skills such as holding a pencil and learning how to write.¹⁴⁰ However, purposeful play and child-centered learning has visibly taken priority within the district.

This purposeful, joyful play that is taking place may challenge America's prioritization of competition and efficiency. It may even undermine it. But educators are finally coming to the realization that the unrelenting pressure for higher test scores and rigid academic content linked to America's quest for global economic supremacy is unsuitable for kindergarteners.¹⁴¹ The standards-based culture that promotes performance and accountability is outdated—and it was inappropriate to begin with. Kindergarten is not a business. Young children do need to learn the

2018, <https://www.the74million.org/article/a-new-push-for-play-based-learning-why-districts-say-its-leading-to-more-engaged-students-collaborative-classmates-and-better-grades/>.

¹³⁷ Monica Disare, "'Common Core' No More: New York Moves to Adopt Revised Standards with New Name," Chalkbeat, September 11, 2017, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2017/9/11/21100905/common-core-no-more-new-york-moves-to-adopt-revised-standards-with-new-name>.

¹³⁸ Stringer, "A New Push for Play-Based Learning."

¹³⁹ Stringer, "A New Push for Play-Based Learning."

¹⁴⁰ Stringer, "A New Push for Play-Based Learning."

¹⁴¹ Mondale and Patton, *School*, 180-181.

skills to perform well in an “information-based workplace.”¹⁴² Kindergartners should not be pitted against each other, nor should they be subjected to harmful educational practices. They are not robots that absorb information passively—they are human beings with a unique set of skills and a need to actively participate in their learning. They need to know that they are cared for and valued within the classroom. They should be encouraged to collaborate with one another while engaging in motivating, multidimensional learning experiences. But above all, they need to play. After all, play is their work—even if facets of contemporary American culture say otherwise.

Final Thoughts

If we want to foster student eagerness towards school, which was noted by Watertown educators as a positive outcome of this shift in learning, we need to continue down the path paved by these pioneer districts.¹⁴³ We need to move away from standardized testing that is detrimental to student health and motivation, and incorporate assessment techniques that celebrate student knowledge while informing future instruction. We must create an enriching, well-rounded curriculum design that includes the traditional areas of ELA, math, social studies, science, and the arts, as well as physical and social emotional development.¹⁴⁴ Teachers must provide high-quality, flexible instruction that aids students in growth across developmental domains instead of administering narrow practices that sort students into fixed groups and put children at risk.¹⁴⁵ Most importantly, we need to understand that play-based practices are not a nuisance to student learning. Play-based instruction is the most effective way to educate young children and should be the chief paradigm of kindergarten education. Undoubtedly, some

¹⁴² Mondale and Patton, *School*, 181.

¹⁴³ Stringer, “A New Push for Play-Based Learning.”

¹⁴⁴ Graue, “Reimagining Kindergarten,” 31.

¹⁴⁵ Graue, “Reimagining Kindergarten,” 31.

academic material and content does have a place within the American kindergarten, but hands-off, didactic teaching should not be the driving force behind student learning. Young children are curious beings who need a nurturing, playful space to explore the world around them. We can provide them with academic opportunities, but at the end of the day, America's fixation on competition and standardization no longer has a place within the kindergarten classroom.

Chapter 2: Putting Young Students on a Better Path

Part I: Reflections from the Classroom

Stepping Foot into Fifth Grade

Will play-based, hands-on learning ever be possible with increasingly difficult curriculum being created and implemented into the classroom? Will students ever be able to engage in cooperative learning with desks being separated by six-feet long pieces of tape? Will social-emotional learning ever be considered a priority within a competitive and standardized educational system? These were all questions I asked myself before stepping foot in the fifth-grade classroom I was assigned to for the first time last semester. The thought of teaching 24 fifth-graders in-person in the middle of a pandemic was daunting. My fear of all these unknowns kept creeping into my mind. I wanted to provide students with a supportive and engaging learning environment while covering the demanding academic content at the upper-elementary level. I sought to provide my students with as many opportunities for social interaction as possible within the confines of social distancing and quarantines. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed how I perceived teaching and instruction. However, dynamic teaching and collaboration will always remain at the forefront of what I do.

In the fall of 2021, I spent the semester in a fifth-grade classroom as part of my student teaching placement. Student teaching is part of the certification process to become a teacher. As part of the training regimen, the student teacher begins by observing the cooperating teacher in action. For the first few weeks, I was able to watch my cooperating teacher establish classroom routines, build rapport with students, plan and deliver lessons, and work closely with the other fifth-grade team members to discuss content and share materials. This observation process helped me become acclimated with the daily functioning of our classroom and gain an

understanding of students' diverse learning needs. I then gradually started taking over the core subject areas. Through this closely supervised style of teaching, I received support from my cooperating teacher planning lessons that aligned with the curriculum and standards provided while acquiring valuable feedback to improve future instruction.

Eventually, I took over every aspect of teaching the class. I was tasked with instructing students, enforcing routines, helping students transition between subjects, and managing students' wellbeing from the time they walked into the compact, brick building to the moment they stepped foot on the bus to head home. Throughout the process, I gained more confidence than I ever imagined. Though it was incredibly stressful at times balancing all the responsibilities of a typical elementary teacher, I now have a new appreciation for the field and feel prepared to construct my own classroom community. Now, at this point, you are probably wondering what it was like to be catapulted into the middle of a classroom during a pandemic with just a mask and school-provided natural disinfectant wipes. At first, I felt like I was being thrown to the wolves. In the back of my mind, I knew that infections and quarantines were bound to reach my class. It was unavoidable. But how do you shield that kind of worry from a group of adolescents who crave social interaction after a year and a half of virtual learning? I needed to make the most of our time in the physical classroom space and form meaningful connections with students right off the bat to ease anxieties, theirs and mine.

After working with emerging kindergartners and first graders for the past few years, I figured I would have a tough time with this. After all, there is a world's difference between conversing with little ones in the early childhood stage and communicating with emerging teens who think they are full-fledged adults. Spoiler: They are not as mature as they think. But then I realized we had more in common than I thought. I have shared their frustration regarding the

world shutting down and virtual socialization becoming the new norm. I understand the disappointment of not being able to learn in-person for months on end. I have shed countless tears over feeling like I am missing out on some of the most critical and transformative years of my life. By realizing these commonalities, I discovered that I could be more than just a mentor to these students. I could be a lifeline.

It is because of the meaningful relationships that I formed with my students that I left my placement feeling fulfilled. My students helped me come into my own as a teacher and taught me paramount lessons about the profession. Most importantly, I learned that it is okay to mess up. I will be the first to admit that the first couple of weeks of teaching was marked by many stumbles and a general lack of confidence. I questioned whether education was really the right track for me. It can be terrifying to think that students' academic learning and development rests in your hands. However, I quickly realized that children are some of this society's most accepting people. They do not care if your delivery of a lesson is imperfect. They will not castigate you if an activity does not go as planned. At the end of the day, they seek human connection, validation, and sincerity. My students did not focus on my weaknesses, but rather accepted me as another member of the community. After a taxing year and a half characterized by instability and unimaginable suffering, our children just want to be in school with their friends. Plain and simple.

I also learned some harsher lessons about the politics of the American education system, the increasing influence of standardized practices within the classroom, and the difficulties of teaching in a way that promotes social collaboration in the midst of what many would call an unprecedented historical moment. Regarding the politics of education, I became aware of the hierarchical system in which teachers must respond to the demands of those above and around

them. There are many forces and people pulling educators in different directions that convolute their own purposes and goals for teaching. It is easy to perceive teachers as the puppets of the school administration, district officials, curricula creators, and family members, all of which attempt to influence the information that our children are taught. It is mindboggling to think that teachers have all this knowledge and training in best practices, and yet their autonomy in the classroom is limited. And if teachers stray from the rigid dictates created by political figures outside of the world of education, they could find themselves in the crossfire of criticism and marginalization. Sometimes teachers must choose between what they know is right for students and what uninformed decision-makers think is best for the advancement of our educational system. We want to put our students first, but that cannot happen when American exceptionalism, intellectual dominance, and politics are prioritized.

Time for a Change

Regarding the standardized, “one-size-fits-all” model instituted in many American classrooms, I can confirm that in a community with 24 students who have unique learning needs, some will be left behind. And the lack of resources or professionals utilized by the school only reinforces the gaps between high-achieving students and those who need additional services. We have adopted the factory model of education because it is the most efficient, but it is not considerate of our students’ diverse intellectual capabilities. We are doing a disservice to our students by not providing them with the collaborative learning and hands-on instruction that we know is developmentally appropriate. Research has shown time and time again that removing play in favor academically rigorous instruction has devastating impacts on children’s healthy

development. Students who learn from play not only achieve favorable educational outcomes, but they also acquire the soft skills necessary to build meaningful relationships.

While we have made some progress toward incorporating more student input and involvement in their educations, we still have a long way to go in parting with outdated modes of teaching. For example, district-issued curriculum and tests reinforce “teaching to the test” approaches and give students limited opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge. In my classroom, I often felt confined to the workbooks and materials provided by the creators of the fifth-grade math curriculum. There were very few opportunities for students to engage with manipulatives, which helps them build a conceptual understanding of the topics. There was more room for creativity with the reading and writing lessons since we were not provided with an outsourced curriculum. As a result, I observed participation increase during reading and writing as students had the opportunity to deliberate with one another and influence the course of the discussion.

That said, collaborative learning was not the same as it had been before the pandemic. Before, teachers were able to form small groups and provide targeted instruction to help students get to where they needed to be. Because of the dangers of mixing pods and neglecting social distancing guidelines, lessons were tailored to the whole class and did not always provide students with the chance to work with others who had similar learning needs. For example, in a normal year, my cooperating teacher would create math groups to provide students with activities that are tailored to their abilities and identify gaps in student knowledge. She would also try to create enrichment projects for students who could use an additional challenge. But the pandemic put a halt to personalized learning and small group instruction. Additionally, non-academic periods like recess, lunch, and snack time needed to be closely monitored. Students

could not eat with their friends in other classes or even with peers in their own class who sat at different pods. They had scheduled days on the playground to ensure that classes did not intermingle at recess.

From academic instruction to moments of leisure, it was evident that students' social-emotional needs were not being met. This negligence poses concerns for the stability of our fragile education system, especially during a time when students are already falling behind as a result of virtual learning and lack of social opportunities. As we consider the repercussions for our youngest and most vulnerable students, we must remember what once fueled the enterprise of early childhood education: the needs and pursuits of each individual child. I argue that as we continue to transition back to in-person learning, plans need to be put in place prioritizing pedagogical strategies that will support students' social-emotional learning and development. Rather than reverting to the outdated, standardized academic model that has prevailed throughout American classrooms over the past few decades, we should use this time to re-imagine and revamp the mission of kindergarten education. Now is the time to put students on a better path—one that fosters motivation through play-based learning.

Part II: A New Normal

The Onset of a Global Pandemic

Before discussing the increasing need for play in kindergarten classrooms as students transition back to in-person learning, I will first examine the origins of the deadly pandemic that transformed the lives of children across the country. On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic as COVID-19 cases surged throughout the world. Subsequently, efforts were made to control the spread of the highly transmissible, deadly

disease.¹⁴⁶ Most significantly, social distancing policies were enacted to limit exposure by reducing face-to-face contact and curtailing the interactions of people in community settings. Researchers Christina O’Keeffe and Sinead McNally note that for many children across the globe, “their worlds were turned upside down as they were confined to their homes.”¹⁴⁷ School closures in particular presented unthinkable challenges, as schools not only provide students with learning and socialization opportunities, but also supply families and caregivers with resources such as food and child support. However, research around the pandemic tends to focus on the adverse impacts of COVID on world economies and public health rather than illuminating the considerable disruptions that children and families have experienced in their daily routines.¹⁴⁸

The trepidation and stress experienced by children over the past few years often goes under the radar. Schools are at the frontline in offering emotional support to children during times of crises and, for many students, this safeguard has been removed.¹⁴⁹ According to O’Keeffe and McNally, “Emerging research highlights increased levels of social isolation, loneliness and anxiety among children during the pandemic... As a result, schools will likely play a fundamental role in supporting all children as countries attempt to tackle the repercussions of this pandemic on children.”¹⁵⁰ In my own placement, I worked with students who were diagnosed with anxiety during the isolation period and struggled to grapple with the uncertainties. One of these students refused to attend school on Halloween, which is one of the most anticipated days of the year, because his closest friend was stuck in quarantine. This student

¹⁴⁶ Christina O’Keeffe and Sinead McNally, “‘Uncharted Territory’: Teachers’ Perspectives on Play in Early Childhood Classrooms in Ireland During the Pandemic,” *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 29, No. 1 (2021): 79.

¹⁴⁷ O’Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 79.

¹⁴⁸ O’Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 79.

¹⁴⁹ O’Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 80.

¹⁵⁰ O’Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 80.

was terrified of feeling isolated again. Many of my students dreaded being separated from their peers after the trauma they experienced nearly a year and a half prior. They felt helpless in the face of this ominous disease. I witnessed how the pandemic had taken a toll on their social-emotional wellbeing, severing the healthy interactions they desperately needed.

When analyzing data collected from a parent survey regarding children's home learning activities and preschool participation during the pandemic, American education economist W. Steven Barnett and researcher Kwanghee Jung found that "parents reported unusually high rates of social-emotional or mental health problems for their young children."¹⁵¹ The pandemic upended homelife and school programs, challenging the ability of families and communities to provide optimal learning experiences for young children. These changes are likely to have significant repercussions on children's learning and development.¹⁵² Barnett and Jung found increases in serious social-emotional problems, noting especially high levels of conduct problems and lack of prosocial behavior.¹⁵³ These developments not only pose difficulties for children as they reacclimate to learning in a community setting, but they also threaten the ability of teachers to achieve curricular goals and facilitate meaningful educational experiences for all students.

¹⁵¹ W. Steven Barnett and Kwanghee Jung, "Seven Impacts of the Pandemic on Young Children and their Parents: Initial Findings from NIEER'S December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey," Rutgers Graduate School of Education, February 2021, https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/NIEER_Seven_Impacts_of_the_Pandemic_on_Young_Children_and_their_Parents.pdf.

¹⁵² Barnett and Jung, "Seven Impacts of the Pandemic."

¹⁵³ Barnett and Jung, "Seven Impacts of the Pandemic."

Educators' Perspectives on Incorporating Play

As part of their study, O'Keeffe and McNally surveyed teachers in Ireland, inquiring about their position on the prioritization of play in early childhood education during school closures. One of their conclusions was that teachers credited play as an “especially important pedagogical tool in supporting young children’s social-emotional development.”¹⁵⁴ Two themes that they identified in their study were (1) play as a support for children’s social development and (2) play as a support for children’s emotional development. Over half of the respondents who indicated that play would be incorporated into classroom practices upon returning to school referenced supporting children’s social development. Teachers acknowledged the need for children to play with each other again after a traumatic couple of months, as well as the need for students to relearn social and communication skills.¹⁵⁵

Additionally, nearly half of the respondents suggested that play would be used in their classrooms to support children’s emotional development. Many teachers who took part in the study underscored that play is a healthy way for children to learn how to manage emotions and process the trauma induced by the COVID lockdown.¹⁵⁶ We already know that the intensified presence of academics and the often developmentally inappropriate demands in early childhood settings have created new pressures for many young students. Increased levels of fear and anxiety associated with the pandemic only heighten the onset of social and emotional complications in the classroom. Accordingly, play is now being looked at as a strategy to help

¹⁵⁴ O'Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 79.

¹⁵⁵ O'Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 83-84.

¹⁵⁶ O'Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 84.

students to manage stress, express their emotions, and ultimately to facilitate learning.¹⁵⁷ I will expand on the re-introduction and the importance of play in the following section.

Learning Loss in Elementary Education

The researchers in the two studies referenced above also discovered that learning opportunities at home and in early childhood programs were lost, which is consistent with findings in other evaluations about the educational experiences of elementary-age students during the pandemic. Daniel J. Levy is the president of the Child and Teen Wellness Center and was the past president of the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. As a pediatrician serving a diverse population of families, he has witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of a year without meaningful instruction on the youngest school-age children. Levy claims, “At least half of my kindergarten-through-third-grade patients are six months to a year behind, based on my evaluations. The implications are huge: Kids who can’t read completely by the end of third grade are handicapped in their ability to succeed in school.”¹⁵⁸ Though Levy encourages family involvement, some families are unable to provide the critical care necessary to support students’ academic development.¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, schools will be tasked with confronting the gaps caused by learning loss during the pandemic, which teachers are already grappling with as students start to return to in-person learning.

Within my placement, I worked with students who were multiple grade levels behind their peers, particularly in math. The whole semester, my cooperating teacher and I felt like we

¹⁵⁷ “Play and Early Learning During COVID-19,” Right To Play, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco-covid-19_ed-webinar-14-right_to_play.pdf.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel J. Levy quoted in “How the Pandemic Affected Kindergarten,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/15/opinion/letters/kindergarten-covid.html>.

¹⁵⁹ “Play and Early Learning During COVID-19.”

were playing catch-up to get students to where they needed to be. I had fifth graders who could not tell time or recall basic multiplication facts, which are skills that they should have mastered in second and third grade. These gaps make it incredibly difficult for teachers to introduce new concepts that build on prior skills. Especially with fast-paced and demanding curricula, students cannot afford to fall behind. And pandemic-related quarantines only add a new layer of complexity to this recent surge of learning loss. When students are sent home because of contracting or being exposed to COVID, they skip integral learning experiences that they would have gained through classroom instruction. They miss out on the opportunity to ask questions and collaborate with teachers and peers, which enhances their understanding of the material.

An additional challenge that coincides with learning loss in elementary-age students is significant drops in kindergarten enrollment, which was visible during the previous school year. Education reporter Emily Tate noted a 16 percent decrease (on average) in enrollment, with some families opting to hold their children back a year or selecting the path of homeschooling.¹⁶⁰ As children transition back into the physical school space, educators have good reason to be worried. Tate asserts, “Many of those children lack the school readiness that their older peers were afforded in kindergarten, due to the pandemic’s impact on social interactions, structured learning experiences, and consistent, high-quality instruction.”¹⁶¹ Tate adds that children will now enter kindergarten with even more pronounced learning needs, as many are just beginning to step foot inside a classroom and socialize with other children again.¹⁶² With this in mind, we

¹⁶⁰ Emily Tate, “Kindergarten Transitions Are Never Easy. But the Pandemic Has Made Them Harder,” *EdSurge*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2021-04-16-kindergarten-transitions-are-never-easy-but-the-pandemic-has-made-it-harder>.

¹⁶¹ Tate, “Kindergarten Transitions Are Never Easy.”

¹⁶² Tate, “Kindergarten Transitions Are Never Easy.”

need to endorse a pedagogical strategy to help students rebuild relationships and work through their anxieties and fears in safe, non-threatening ways. We need to advocate for play.

Part III: Re-evaluating Priorities

Empowering Children through Play

Many students have been out of the physical classroom space and separated from their peers for months. One challenge that many educators are currently facing, given that many students have missed out on optimal learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, is setting realistic expectations for students' developmental, academic, and socio-emotional competences. Basic skills like turn-taking, sharing, and walking in a line need to be remodeled and retaught before instruction can take place.¹⁶³ These are crucial skills that promote strong relationships and meaningful community building within the classroom. They are also expectations that should be reinforced through play-based practices. The rigorous, one-size-fits-all model of education is not going to cut it when considering how to productively transition students back to in-person learning.

One non-profit organization that reinforces the instrumental role of play in children's healthy development is Right To Play. The organization was founded in 2000 by Johann Olav Koss and is headquartered in Toronto, Canada. Right To Play's mission is to empower vulnerable children around the world to overcome adversity through play. The group works with schools and community-based organizations, training teachers and coaches how to competently deliver innovative play-based approaches. In a statement about play and early learning during the pandemic, the organization claims that though the strategy is often overlooked, "Play can support

¹⁶³ Tate, "Kindergarten Transitions Are Never Easy."

the holistic skills development and resilience children need to thrive in a complex, changing world.”¹⁶⁴ For many children, elevated levels of stress have accompanied the onset of the pandemic. Research in neuroscience and child psychology illustrates that play is conducive to children’s ability to manage stress and express their emotions.¹⁶⁵ Play should be integrated into classroom learning for reasons that will be explained later in this section. But if access to play has been significantly reduced during one of the most critical times during the day, recess, is there any hope for increasing play in learning spaces?

Sacrificing Recess for Academic Instruction

For anyone who has attended an elementary school in the past few decades, it should come as no surprise that recess periods have been getting shorter. Recess is an important time for students to cultivate strong relationships and social skills, such as collaboration and good decision-making. When I was in fifth and sixth grade, I recall establishing rules of play on the four-square court and utilizing effective communication in the process. On the playground in my early elementary years, I practiced taking turns on the monkey bars and the swings. Clearly, recess is not just a break in the day, but it represents another opportunity to promote social-emotional learning. But when schools offer a meager twenty-minute recess period, students are shortchanged the essential learning experiences that occur outside the four walls of the classroom.

According to Mary Ellen Flannery, senior writer for *National Education Association (NEA) News*, children in urban schools serving more students of color tend to have less recess time, or no recess at all, compared to children in other school settings. Some of this problem can

¹⁶⁴ “Play and Early Learning During COVID-19.”

¹⁶⁵ “Play and Early Learning During COVID-19.”

be attributed to the test-score era, during which schools that were deemed as “failing” determined that students would benefit from more time in classroom seats. Some large districts eliminated recess completely.¹⁶⁶ Flannery points out that this was a very misguided approach to teaching young children. Certainly, a teacher or child developmental specialist would not make or advocate for these anti-recess policies. Rather, Flannery writes, “It was people who thought having 7-year-olds sit still all day was the best way for them to learn math.”¹⁶⁷ All of this is to say that many education policymakers are largely not adept in formulating developmentally appropriate methods for teaching young children. They are not fighting to educate our youth on the frontlines, nor do they often see the pandemic-related trauma that students are now recovering from. We already knew this, but it is worth repeating.

Reconstructing Kindergarten

We also know that before the pandemic, many kindergartens across the country utilized predominantly academic approaches. According to William Crain, professor of psychology at The City College of the City University of New York, kindergartens had become so academic that opportunities for socialization and creative play were crowded out. He contends, “The academic instruction often ignored children’s interests and capacities, leaving children frustrated and stressed-out. Many lost their love for learning.”¹⁶⁸ As we continue to transition students back into the classroom, we need to re-evaluate our priorities for young learners. Naturally, educators and families will worry about students’ academic deficits caused by impractical learning

¹⁶⁶ Mary Ellen Flannery, “Recess During the Pandemic: More Important Than Ever,” *NEA News*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/recess-during-pandemic-more-important-ever>.

¹⁶⁷ Flannery, “Recess During the Pandemic.”

¹⁶⁸ William Crain quoted in “How the Pandemic Affected Kindergarten.”

circumstances. However, before we begin to fill in those gaps, we need to help students reacclimate to in-person learning in healthy, informal ways. We should provide kindergarten students with low-pressure environments where they can safely express their emotions and interact with peers. Ultimately, play is the most important way we can support children during this challenging time. It is also increasingly recognized as a valuable pedagogical strategy within the fluctuating educational landscape.¹⁶⁹ After decades of improper learning conditions, now is the time for an overhaul.

In the previous section, I discussed the benefits of play on children's social and emotional development, as noted by teachers in O'Keeffe and McNally's study. Teachers also indicated the value of play in aiding students in the transition back to school. Since the rise of online learning has altered students' perceptions of the classroom, incorporating play into daily educational practices could help students move toward a new normal in a healthy and gradual manner. Respondents further suggested that play could provide a sense of familiarity and routine for children. Students who struggle with anxiety or had negative experiences during the lockdown could especially benefit from the security that play provides.¹⁷⁰ To reiterate, play is a safe way for students to process trauma and build resilience, making it a powerful outlet for healing and an important pedagogical tool for educators to consider.

Though participants, among others, acknowledged the utility of play in facilitating learning and accomplishing curricular goals, play was primarily discussed for its role in promoting social and emotional development and easing transitions.¹⁷¹ Teachers are acutely aware of the disruptions that the pandemic has created for many children. They are dealing with

¹⁶⁹ O'Keeffe and McNally, "Teacher's Perspectives on Play," 79.

¹⁷⁰ O'Keeffe and McNally, "Teacher's Perspectives on Play," 85.

¹⁷¹ O'Keeffe and McNally, "Teacher's Perspectives on Play," 85.

the consequences of social deprivation caused by school closures and months of isolation. They seek to create routines and instate community-building practices to give students a sense of normalcy within the new in-person model. But this reintegration process is not an easy feat considering the rigid restrictions that many schools have put in place to keep students safe.

Valerie Strauss, educational writer for the *Washington Post*, lists just a few of the constraints that children face: “Playgrounds have been shut down. Children are told to stay apart at parks and during playtime. They are separated by Plexiglas during lunch. When they do see another child, they are often masked.”¹⁷² It is close to an anti-social learning environment. School officials have been gearing much of their efforts toward keeping the virus out of classrooms, as necessary. Now, as students begin to get vaccinated and infection rates decline, the focus should be shifted toward providing students with ample opportunities for socialization and play.

Section IV: The Science of Play

Reaching for Breakthroughs

Recently, I had the opportunity to correspond with Sally Gibney, the Senior Project Manager at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Gibney is part of a multidisciplinary team dedicated to driving science-based innovation that achieves transformable change for children facing adversity. Researchers at the Center think that “society pays a huge price when children do not reach their potential, because half a century of policies and programs have not produced breakthrough outcomes, and because dramatic advances in science are ready

¹⁷² Valerie Strauss, “Why It’s a Problem That Kids Have Been Deprived of Play During the Pandemic,” *Washington Post*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/03/17/play-deprivation-during-pandemic-is-big-problem-for-kids/>.

to be used to achieve a promising future for every child.”¹⁷³ Gibney explains that there is often a disconnect between the advancements of the science community and what is actually being implemented on the ground.¹⁷⁴ Accordingly, the Center acts as a link between scientific research and the organizations that are doing important work in the field of early childhood education. And, as Gibney affirms, “The relationships are really reciprocal, where the Center is sharing and translating complex science, but our partners who are out in the field are providing really important insights into what their day-to-day challenges are that can guide what our scientists study.” Science-based innovation does not occur in isolation. Rather, it is through partnerships with fellow change agents that positive outcomes can materialize.

Building Resilience through Play

Through my discussion with Gibney and learning about the Center, it became clear that the organization advocates for the pedagogical approach that I stress throughout this project: play. The Center stipulates that play “contributes to sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.”¹⁷⁵ The emphasis on developing resilience through play is what strikes me as especially valuable and relevant to my research. Hands-on learning experiences are known to build students’ confidence, and with confidence comes resilience. Students who are confident learners are more prepared to tackle adversity head-on, which is imperative considering all the hurdles that have been thrown their way since the start of the pandemic. As discussed by Esben Stærk, president of LEGO Education, hands-on opportunities typically involve trial-and-error, which provides students with a safe environment

¹⁷³ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>.

¹⁷⁴ Sally Gibney, Personal Interview, April 23, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Center on the Developing Child.

to work through frustrations and teaches them to persist if they do not get it right on the first try. Stærk claims, “Students build resilience through meaningful failure.”¹⁷⁶ Ultimately, if students are taught to have a growth mindset and recognize that mistakes are acceptable, then they can learn to work through them instead of becoming preoccupied or discouraged by them.

The Center also acknowledges that play in early childhood is instrumental in reinforcing the following three principles: supporting positive relationships, strengthening core life skills, and reducing sources of stress. It notes that the complex interactions that manifest when children play help “build their brains,” which Gibney stresses as one of the benefits of play-based learning.¹⁷⁷ According to Gibney, “We know that brains are built over time, and in order to build strong foundations, there are many things that children need, like supportive relationships, reducing sources of stress, and active skill-building activities.” Regarding the latter example, Gibney notes that executive function and self-regulation skills are central to young children’s development. Play can be used to cultivate and refine those skills. Gibney stresses that play needs to start being understood as a tool that is critical for healthy brain development. The removal of play in early childhood education in favor of academically rigorous activities is illogical and unhelpful.

In Stærk’s article, he incorporates research from the LEGO Foundation, which is committed to empowering children to become creative, engaged, and lifelong learners through play-based learning. A portion of the foundation’s profits goes to funding research projects, activities, and partnerships.¹⁷⁸ Stærk underscores, “The LEGO foundation found that inherent joy

¹⁷⁶ Esben Stærk, “Building Kids’ Resilience through Play is More Crucial Than Ever,” *Scientific American*, June 3, 2020, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/building-kids-resilience-through-play-is-more-crucial-than-ever/>.

¹⁷⁷ Center on the Developing Child.

¹⁷⁸ Jennifer Palumbo, “Why the Lego Foundation Wants to Improve Early Education Worldwide,” *Forbes*, March 15, 2022,

and affective nature of play, along with its stimulation of multiple brain networks, make play particularly effective in maintaining and developing the social and emotional skills needed to deal with challenging and changing circumstances, as well as the resilience and creativity to adapt.”¹⁷⁹ Some of the advantages of play that the foundation found that are consistent with my own research include reducing anxiety, strengthening social relationships, and students taking ownership over their learning.¹⁸⁰ While academic performance is an important learning outcome, soft skills and self-worth dictate how students perform beyond the realms of education.

Fighting for Play During the Pandemic

Interestingly, the Center has a grant with the LEGO Foundation, which Gibney manages. When asked about the Center’s operation during the pandemic, Gibney claimed that the pandemic did not disrupt the team’s day-to-day activities because its work with organizations all over the world and had already been communicating virtually. What did shift was the needs of their partner organizations, specifically the LEGO Foundation. Gibney asserts, “We have a pretty clear-cut list of activities that we do with them (creating common materials, writing research papers on play, etc.) but as soon as the pandemic hit, they needed to pivot their attention to crisis management.” The Center began hosting community conversations and tried to create a less formal space for people to come together and talk about the challenges they were seeing in the field. Another challenge that Gibney discovered was the high levels of stress adults were experiencing, which impaired their ability to carry out innovative and meaningful projects. Gibney states, “Many adults felt like it was taking everything within them just to get through the

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jenniferpalumbo/2022/03/15/why-the-lego-foundation-wants-to-improve-early-education-worldwide/?sh=5d6687f211ed>.

¹⁷⁹ Stærk, “Building Kids’ Resilience through Play.”

¹⁸⁰ Stærk, “Building Kids’ Resilience through Play.”

day and asking them to be playful and engaging in creative ways was too much, unless they were predisposed to act that way. At the Center, we tried to share activity guides for how parents can play with kids with just the things they have on hand.” Since play is conducive to reducing stress and supporting the developing brain, it is an essential resource for children as they navigate the adversities inflicted by the pandemic.

Gibney believes that as we transition back to in-person learning, we need to think about the students who left the classroom back in March 2020 and have “missed so many of those critical days of just learning what it means to be in a classroom setting.” When asked whether she thinks play will be attainable as students re-acclimate to the classroom, Gibney had a positive outlook. Considering her position working with LEGO and her experiences as a former teacher in a Reggio Emilia classroom, she understands that everyone in those networks is fighting hard for the importance of play. Gibney contends, “I’ve seen so much research on how play can support learning and better school outcomes. But I also know that there is a really harsh reality that the information doesn’t seem to be getting into the hands of decision makers who are also pushing for these higher academic demands.” Accordingly, it is up to educators to figure out how to implement play and motivate young learners while balancing the curricular goals created by unqualified outsiders. And as we move into a more virtual environment, Gibney worries that teachers may feel more pressured to focus solely on academics.

However, Gibney found that teachers recognize the importance of play and listen to the argument that play is an essential building block for healthy brain development. She suggests, “If you make the argument that play is building these core-life skills, it can start to feel like less of a luxury. I think teachers have just about the hardest job on the planet, so I hope organizations like the Center can help them to feel supported in making this argument.” The Center aims to

empower change agents by presenting key findings about the science of early childhood in clear, accurate, and uniform ways.¹⁸¹ The work that it does around the globe to support child development and provide children with enriched learning opportunities is paramount. More specifically, its efforts to promote play in early childhood are admirable, especially as I think about their real-life applications.

Part V: Learning in Action

Designing a Safe Space

In this section, I propose some hands-on, play-based activities that could be incorporated into a kindergarten classroom and adapted to meet the safety measures necessitated by the pandemic. There are articles that discuss some games that could be played during recess to promote relationship building and social-emotional learning. While this unstructured time for play is important, I focus on the use of play inside the classroom to support academic and curricular goals. Each activity is grounded in at least one learning standard, making it applicable to authentic classroom learning. Although I focus specifically on literacy in the first chapter, I demonstrate how play can be integrated into each academic subject—ELA, math, science, and social studies. Additionally, I explain how the activities can support students’ social and emotional development, which is critical to consider when transitioning students back to the school setting. Before I introduce the activities, however, I share my vision of a kindergarten classroom that fosters respectful community engagement and empowers students to learn within and from their own environment.

¹⁸¹ Center on the Developing Child.

It is crucial for teachers to design a classroom space in which students feel included and motivated. Think about it—would you feel inclined to participate in a kindergarten classroom with bare walls, textbooks, and a rigid seating arrangement? We want students to be excited about school, and the classroom setup is instrumental in how they approach learning each day when they step foot into the space. In my classroom, I would incorporate lots of color and light. I would display student work on the walls to give students a sense of pride in their creations and to send the message that, as teachers, we value what they do. Including student work throughout the classroom enables students to learn from one another and appreciate the work of others. It also represents another way to nurture respect and empathy within the classroom community. Further, I would display academic resources like alphabet and number charts for students to use as a reference when completing their work and engaging in play. It is important for these resources to be at eye level so that students interact with them productively and consistently.

Regarding the room's physical layout, I would seat students at tables rather than individual desks to encourage more productive group work and provide opportunities for socialization. Tables allow for easier collaboration, create more space to move around throughout the classroom, and teach students to be more organized with their supplies. I would offer flexible seating options as well as a carpeted area and mats so students can learn comfortably and dynamically. Along the walls, students would have access to bookshelves with a wide range of trade books organized by reading level, and an abundance of art supplies to spark creativity. Moreover, I would offer students tools and spaces that promote play throughout the classroom, such as open-ended toys and a dramatic play area. The classroom environment is commonly known as a third teacher. Every corner of the room should have a purpose and must be rich in potential to cultivate learning and engagement.

English Language Arts

The ELA standard I will use is “KL5c: Use words to identify and describe the world, making connections between words and their use (e.g., places at home that are colorful).”¹⁸² For my activity, I will have students complete a scavenger hunt with items hidden around the classroom. First, I will select several brightly colored items that can be described using vivid words. While the students are out of the classroom, I will hide these items. Before completing the activity, I will ask students why it is important to describe the environment around us in detail. I will then hold up an item or two to get students to practice using descriptive words as a whole class. After, students will be split into small groups to complete the scavenger hunt. Each group will be given a sheet of paper with clues guiding them to each hidden object. Students will take turns reading off the clues and finding the items. Reading scaffolds will be provided for students who need extra assistance. After discovering each item, students must come up with three descriptive words that characterize it. Once every group has completed the scavenger hunt, we will reconvene as a class and collectively describe the objects using words that students brainstormed. At the end of the lesson, we will review the importance of using colorful adjectives to represent things in our world.

There are several ways that this activity supports students’ social and emotional needs. Most evidently, students work in groups to complete the activity. By collaborating with their peers, students can practice effective communication and problem-solving skills in a supportive environment. Students can process the information collectively and provide one another with feedback to enrich their understanding of the content. Other benefits of group work include students sharing diverse perspectives, delegating roles and responsibilities, and tackling more

¹⁸² New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards, 26.

complex problems than then they could on their own.¹⁸³ In addition, students practice taking turns reading off the clues and discovering the items. Turn-taking is one social rule that is important for students to grasp so they can interact with one another in respectful and considerate ways. It also gives each student the opportunity to participate and gain a sense of achievement from contributing to the group's progress. In this activity, academic learning is enhanced by students' ability to work cohesively as a group and embrace one another's approaches.

Math

The math standard I will use is "NY-K.CC.6: Identify whether the number of objects in one group is greater than (more than), less than (fewer than), or equal to (the same as) the number of objects in another group."¹⁸⁴ I admit that the math activity I use is not entirely original. When I shadowed in a first-grade classroom, this game was used as a strategy to help students compare numbers using manipulatives. However, I have modified this activity to fit into a progression that would help students transition from a conceptual to an abstract understanding. In this activity, students are split into pairs and receive two "treasure chests," or to-go containers. Each container consists of a certain number of linking cubes, which students are informed are "treasure." Upon receiving the containers, on the count of three, both students open the containers and see how many linking cubes are inside. They must work together to figure out which partner has more cubes, or whether both partners have an equal amount. When students are just starting out, I will have them place the cubes in ten-frames so they can visually represent

¹⁸³ "What Are the Benefits of Group Work," Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design/teach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/benefits.html>.

¹⁸⁴ New York State Next Generation Mathematics Learning Standards, 19.

the amounts and more easily compare the values. As students play more and more, they will move away from the ten-frames and develop their own strategies for counting and evaluating the numbers. Eventually, instead of placing linking cubes in the containers, I will give students numerals so they can demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between written numbers and the number of objects.

The most obvious way this activity supports social and emotional learning is students working in pairs to decipher and compare the values. Similar to the reading activity, students receive direct feedback when working with their peers, along with social support to take risks and try new strategies. If there is confusion or disagreement, students can practice respectful conflict resolution. Working with partners or in small groups also enables students to learn from one another, which can be more valuable than solely receiving instruction from a teacher. Sometimes, students can explain a concept in a way that is more comprehensible to their classmates. When a student has the opportunity to teach their classmates, they can articulate their comprehension of the material, and their peers benefit from hearing the concept reinforced or described in a new way. Moreover, by working with manipulatives in pairs, students are responsible for using the learning tools productively to accomplish the lesson's goals. Students can hold each other accountable for staying on task while independently monitoring their own actions and behaviors. Despite the popular belief that math needs to be taught using rigid and direct practices, the subject can provide many opportunities for play and collaboration. It might mean that teachers need to get more creative, but in the end students receive more enriching and meaningful instruction.

Science

The science standard I will use is “K-LS1-1: Use observations to describe patterns of what plants and animals (including humans) need to survive.”¹⁸⁵ In this activity, students will pretend that they are adopting class pets. They will be split into small groups and, one at a time, a student from each group will come up and draw from a selection of pets. Then, each group will be given several cards that contain images of objects that could represent the animal’s basic needs. Students must sort through the cards and decide as a group which images constitute the elements that contribute to the pet’s survival. For example, one group might have a pet rabbit. The students in the group would be given cards that contain different types of foods, liquids, shelters, and toys. From there, students need to decide which items the rabbit’s needs. After each group is finished discussing the matter, I will check that their arrangement is reasonable. From there, students will glue their images to a piece of poster paper and share their findings with the class. At the end of the activity, we will have a class discussion about the three basic needs that promote survival (food, water, and shelter). Students should have observed these three patterns in their own small group discussions. We will also discuss how these categories pertain to humans and plants, and students will later set up an experiment where they test which conditions are most conducive to a plant’s growth and survival.

In this activity, the social-emotional competences come into play when students work in their small groups and collectively decide on resources for their animals. Teamwork in science is integral to students’ innovation and acquisition of new knowledge. Collaborative problem-solving can lead to better outcomes, and students are more likely to take risks and articulate critical observations when they have the support of their peers. In addition to the collaborative

¹⁸⁵ New York State P-12 Science Learning Standards, 6.

and communicative skills discussed in the previous subjects, students also employ responsible decision-making skills by participating in the activity. Students must think about the needs of another living entity and come to conclusions that impact its wellbeing. In doing so, they should gain respect for the facets that compose our environment and build connections between themselves and the natural world. This activity can also promote intrapersonal skills like self-confidence and self-motivation when students are familiar with these animals or have pets of their own at home. Students who have experience caring for animals gain an awareness that they have valuable expertise that, when articulated to their peers, can enhance their learning and confidence. Even students who do not have pets can competently contribute to the group's conversation by thinking about their own basic needs in relation to those of animals.

Social Studies

The standard I will use is “K.3a: Diverse cultural groups within the community and nation embrace unique traditions and beliefs, and celebrate distinct holidays.”¹⁸⁶ The activity I have planned is more hands-on than play-oriented, but students are still at the center of learning. I will begin the lesson by passing around objects that represent or symbolize different holidays. For example, one group might receive a menorah for Hanukkah, while another receives a pumpkin for Halloween. I will provide students with time to explore the objects and make observations about what each item might be used for. To draw on ELA learning, I will encourage students to use colorful descriptive words when articulating what they see. Cross-curricular learning enables students to build connections across subjects, which enhances their understanding of a topic and fosters critical thinking skills. After students have had enough time

¹⁸⁶ New York State K-8 Social Studies Framework, 16.

to examine the objects, we will discuss as a class the importance of holidays, traditions, and symbols in cultivating cultural identity and unity. Then, in small groups, students will create their own holidays that could be celebrated by all students in the class. Students will work together to establish a tradition and create a symbol that correspond to that holiday. At the end of the lesson, students will vote on which holiday they would like to celebrate, and I will set aside a day to observe that holiday as a class.

Social-emotional learning intersects with the lesson because students are learning about holidays and cultural traditions that might be celebrated by their peers or others in their community. Students develop social awareness when they show understanding and empathy for others. By learning about cultures and rituals that differ from their own, students can gain a greater respect for the diverse perspectives that constitute their environment. Students also develop stronger relationships with their peers by sharing features of their cultural identity with others and, more generally, integrating aspects of their home life into classroom learning. In addition to the cultivation of cultural sensitivity, this lesson helps students learn basic social-emotional rules like how to lose gracefully and how to celebrate the accomplishments of others. Since students create their own holidays in groups and vote for one to be adopted by the class, they learn to appreciate the ideas and achievements of their classmates. Not everyone's holiday can be picked, which encourages students to learn from their mistakes and think about strategies to improve. Losing provides a great opportunity for children to learn appropriate actions and responses, in addition to fostering a growth mindset and resilience. Ultimately, students can take pride in their achievements while recognizing that there is always room for improvement. It is crucial to help students understand from a young age that failure is an opportunity to grow. As

educators, we need to provide students with safe spaces to fail and help them understand that their mistakes are valuable learning tools.

Section VI: An Innovative Alternative

The History of Nature Schools

Although the public health crisis has been improving with the development and administration of vaccines that help prevent the spread of COVID-19, the disease will likely persist in schools for a while. With many parents hesitating to get their children vaccinated, quarantines barring students from entry into the classroom, and students falling behind academically as a result, it seems like schools will take even longer to recover. But what if there was an alternative, innovative way we could educate our youngest students while safeguarding their physical health and social-emotional wellbeing? The notion of nature kindergartens and nature-based learning may seem outlandish to some, but increased exposure to the great outdoors might just be what today's students need. Structuring learning environments in nature and creating more opportunities for outdoor play enables students to direct their own learning and immerse themselves in the environment. One doesn't need a degree in education to realize that children are not receiving enough playtime outside during a half hour or less recess period. However, if we stopped viewing time spent outside as a break, and started perceiving it as a learning opportunity, then maybe we could revitalize the purpose of American education.

In response to concern over children's separation from nature, or "indoor-ification," there has been an increased interest in the cultivation of nature schools. These schools regularly hold classes in outdoor settings as opposed to the traditional indoor backdrop, regardless of unfavorable weather conditions. While nature schools are starting to gain traction in North

America, they have a long tradition in Europe. According to scholars Joshua Meyer, Ulrich Müller, and Sarah Macoun, “The Nordic nations of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are generally recognized as founding the first forest schools in the 1950s. Scandinavia’s embrace of the forest school methodology is associated with their cultural belief in nature’s importance to child development and wellbeing.”¹⁸⁷ In fact, the inclusion of nature was a crucial element in the original kindergarten. By the turn of the century, the kindergarten movement was deeply rooted in American culture. Well-rounded curricula at the time included nature interests, as well as moral and physical training, number and form, language, and handwork.¹⁸⁸ Just a few of the nature-based activities that American educator and academic David Sobel lists include walks and excursions, care of living animals, and planting vegetables and flowers.¹⁸⁹ Evidently, nature immersion in childhood education is not a new concept, and has even been reimagined in some of today’s programs to provide students with more opportunities for environmental enrichment.

Nature preschools in North America emerged out of the nature center and environmental education movement. Sobel asserts, “These programs all have beautifully designed indoor facilities, well-established developmentally appropriate curricula, and a commitment to having children outdoors for an hour or more each day.”¹⁹⁰ They aim to expand children’s contact with nature, especially as youth today receive deficient exposure to the outdoors. With the need to hunker down during COVID, children of all ages spent even more time at home than they would have in a normal year. For many children, screen time likely replaced time spent out in nature,

¹⁸⁷ Joshua Meyer, Ulrich Müller, and Sarah Macoun, “Comparing Classroom Context and Physical Activity in Nature and Traditional Kindergartens,” *Children, Youth and Environments* 27, No. 3 (2017): 58-59.

¹⁸⁸ David Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops: The Value of Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens,” *Children, Youth and Environments* 24, No. 2 (2014): 230.

¹⁸⁹ Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 230.

¹⁹⁰ Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 232.

and if students did spend sufficient time outside, they could not share their discoveries with their peers. But the “indoor-ification” that Meyer, Müller, and Macoun discuss (and that Sobel coins) was present long before the current pandemic. In the early twenty-first century, curricular reform measures like No Child Left Behind implemented high-stakes testing and encouraged standardization and accountability within the American education system. Consequently, schools turned to more traditional academic activities and diminished the amount of time that children spent on creative arts, physical education, and recess.¹⁹¹ These trends have caused students to detach from the natural environment. As we (hopefully) begin the return to normalcy, it will be interesting to see whether nature schools surge in popularity and gain a boost in enrollment.

Promoting Play in Environmental Landscapes

It is important to note that no two nature schools are exactly alike. Some schools emphasize nature play and exploration as the central tenet, whereas others are much more conscious of curricular objectives. The different histories and styles associated with nature schools reflect a divide in educational pedagogy and parental perspectives toward school readiness. On the one hand, there is the belief that foundational skills like literacy and math should be incorporated into instruction in more formal ways. On the other hand, some people feel that indoor facilities should be minimized, and children should have the freedom to play and problem solve in different types of conditions.¹⁹² Sobel asks two essential questions that effectively sum up the debate surrounding the purpose of nature schools: “What’s more important in preschool, learning your letters, or learning to overcome your fear of tromping through that deep puddle? Or does learning to overcome your fear create a foundation for

¹⁹¹ Meyer, Müller, and Macoun, “Comparing Classroom Context and Physical Activity,” 57.

¹⁹² Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 235.

learning letters?”¹⁹³ That said, nature-based early childhood programs contain several key commonalities, the most pertinent being that they all prioritize children’s relationship with nature and seek to enrich their knowledge through outdoor experiences.

Nature schools are also similar in that they offer children much of the same academic and social-emotional benefits. Caregivers who are skeptical of nature programs might question how students are supposed to focus and succeed at a big school when they have never even sat at a desk? They wonder how their children will find the discipline for comprehension, the drive to learn multiplication tables, and the determination to participate in countless writing exercises. However, Sobel found that many teachers are pleased with the performance of students who previously attended nature schools. They claim that these students are the readiest to learn and are more socially advanced.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, Sobel notes several social-emotional benefits that students acquire by learning and playing in nature. For example, the problem solving that takes place during play can enhance executive functioning, promoting skills like decision-making and independence.¹⁹⁵ Children are also encouraged to compromise and cooperate to resolve conflicts that arise in play. Accordingly, students develop social and emotional capabilities like “empathy, flexibility, self-awareness, and self-regulation.”¹⁹⁶ Greater emotional intelligence is essential for successful communication and social interaction as students get older.

Meyer, Müller, and Macoun underscore the physical and health-related benefits fostered by nature schools. The authors highlight that these learning environments “engage children in physical activity as they travel through their learning environment and thereby provide

¹⁹³ Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 235.

¹⁹⁴ Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 232.

¹⁹⁵ Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 235.

¹⁹⁶ Sobel, “Learning to Walk Between the Raindrops,” 236.

opportunities to facilitate their motor development and improve physical fitness.”¹⁹⁷ As a result, students gain more confidence in their physical abilities and are more motivated to take risks. Children who receive minimal contact with nature, in contrast, are not afforded these advantages. In the early twenty-first century, the term “nature-deficit disorder” became popularized. It included problems like an increased prevalence of ADHD, higher instances of childhood obesity, and a decline in physical activity.¹⁹⁸ And these issues are only exacerbated within the traditional classroom model, where children remain stationary throughout much of the day and partake in more structured, facilitated activities.¹⁹⁹ Since nature schools provide children with ample space to explore freely and move about their environment, it is safe to say that these students receive far more opportunities for active and meaningful physical engagement.

The Natural Playscape Project

Moreover, environmental landscapes and the open-ended play that they promote inspire many young children to be creative and imaginative, as evidenced by the natural playscape project at The College School in St. Louis, Missouri. The school embraces a nature-based experiential curriculum that encourages students to explore the world through authentic experiences. Uchenna Ogu and Suzie Reynard Schmidt, faculty members at The College School, write about the natural playscape project, in which kindergartners designed a playground using as few human-made materials as possible.²⁰⁰ Before delving into the logistics of the project, Ogu and Schmidt discuss the types of skills that should be taught in modern education. They assert,

¹⁹⁷ Meyer, Müller, Macoun, “Comparing Classroom Context and Physical Activity,” 59.

¹⁹⁸ Meyer, Müller, Macoun, “Comparing Classroom Context and Physical Activity,” 57.

¹⁹⁹ Meyer, Müller, Macoun, “Comparing Classroom Context and Physical Activity,” 69.

²⁰⁰ Uchenna Ogu and Suzie Reynard Schmidt, “Kindergarten: The Natural Playscape Project: A Real-World Study with Kindergartners,” *YC Young Children* 68, No. 4 (2013): 32.

“The social and economic world of today and tomorrow requires global thinkers who are able to critically and creatively work to solve problems and excel as communicators and collaborators.”²⁰¹ By connecting with nature and incorporating hands-on experiences, it appears that these students are gaining expertise that goes beyond the basic academic skills that are often taught through traditional, systematic practices.

Further, Ogu and Reynard mention that through the designing and building process, students can grasp “the responsibilities and interconnectedness of the bigger world in which they live.”²⁰² Reading this, I couldn’t help but think of how students might use play to process the confusion caused by the pandemic. Even some of the fifth graders in my student teaching placement combined play with real-world events, creating a game that I like to call “COVID tag.” One student pretended to be the virus (in human form) and chased the other students around in what seemed to be a traditional game of tag. However, as soon as a student got tagged, they needed to receive the “COVID vaccine” from one of their peers to re-enter the game. I was impressed with the students’ ability to transform a disruptive occurrence into a frivolous, fun activity. It made me realize that students seek to understand and explore the world around them. Educators should provide students with the space, time, and materials to replicate what they see in their own communities, as it would result in more meaningful and long-lasting learning.²⁰³

In terms of the organization of the natural playscape project, students began by learning about play, sustainable schoolyards, and constructing their own miniature models, or “small worlds.”²⁰⁴ As a class, the students adopted rules for creating their models, including the requirement that they use natural resources rather than living or artificial materials. Ogu and

²⁰¹ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 32-33.

²⁰² Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 33.

²⁰³ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 33.

²⁰⁴ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 33.

Schmidt explain, “Spending time in imaginative play, dreaming, and designing small worlds in the school’s backyard and at the park offered plenty opportunities for children to see their creativity come to life.”²⁰⁵ The children also took pride in the works of art that they created, encouraging their families to visit these natural spaces and committing to keeping the terrain safe and clean. From there, students broke into smaller committees to start designing the actual playscape. By the time the project reached its third year of operation, the committees consisted of kindergarten students and second graders (many of whom were part of the project’s initial launch) and drew from the expertise of families and teachers. The committees enabled students to research and pursue one component of the playscape thoroughly.²⁰⁶ The cross-grade level collaboration was especially valuable because the two age groups facilitated and scaffolded each other’s learning, and younger students benefited from the positive models that the older children provided.²⁰⁷ Throughout the process, students became not only researchers and designers, but architects of their own learning. They were inspired to view themselves as “artists, scientists, inventors, and big-picture thinkers,” which gave them a stronger sense of purpose.²⁰⁸

Rain or Shine

Students who took part in this project were also eager to build connections with the natural world, which is what one forest kindergarten closer to home aspires to instill in the next generation of learners. The forest kindergarten at the Waldorf School of Saratoga Springs, New York, offers “an extreme version of outdoor learning taught at more than 100 Waldorf

²⁰⁵ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 33.

²⁰⁶ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 35.

²⁰⁷ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 37.

²⁰⁸ Ogu and Schmidt, “Kindergarten: Natural Playscape Project,” 38.

schools.”²⁰⁹ Pupils ages three to six spend three hours each day outside, regardless of weather conditions. Though students in the program faces challenges that are virtually unimaginable to those in a traditional classroom, Waldorf teachers at the school have witnessed the potency of outdoor experiences on children’s development. In general, students improve large motor skills, resolve social conflict more effectively, and engage in more imaginative play.²¹⁰ Additionally, there are countless opportunities for discovery, which often becomes lost in the curriculum-driven approaches that characterize the conventional American classroom. In fact, students enrolled in these forest programs receive no formal academic curriculum until first grade. Whether that is to the students’ academic detriment or social-emotional betterment is for families to decide.

However, one cannot ignore the potential consequences of the distinct organizational structure associated with less immediate adult supervision, as Meyer, Müller, and Macoun point out. Teachers in nature schools must approach pedagogy and classroom management in creative ways, especially considering the free reign and autonomy that students are given. As I continue to learn and develop effective classroom management strategies in my own practice, I am left with the following questions: How can teachers “establish order, engage students, and elicit student cooperation” when certain learning contexts do not necessitate direct instructional guidance?²¹¹ How do teachers promote school readiness and model appropriate learning and behavioral expectations within classroom structures that advocate for less authoritative approaches?

²⁰⁹ Liz Leyden, “For Forest Kindergartners, Class is Back to Nature, Rain or Shine,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/nyregion/30forest.html>.

²¹⁰ Leyden, “Class is Back to Nature.”

²¹¹ Meyer, Müller, Macoun, “Comparing Classroom Context and Physical Activity,” 60.

Contemplating these questions, I have come to the realization that nature schools might not be exactly what we need just yet as we transition out of an unruly pandemic. Rather, our youngest students, kindergartners, might benefit from more guided settings in which teachers encourage play while establishing routines. That's not to say that we need to overwhelm students with rigorous academic work and developmentally inappropriate curricular objectives. Instead, I argue that we must provide children with safe, intentionally designed spaces to process the radical changes they endured and regain a sense of security. Children need lots of opportunities for imaginative play, but they also need direction from adults on how to self-regulate and develop interpersonal relationships. Keep in mind that recently many young children have been deprived of integral interactive experiences and can benefit from deliberate social-emotional instruction. Now is the time to reimagine and revamp the standardized, academic model that has taken hold on American kindergartens during the past few decades. Further down the road, alternative schooling options like forest kindergartens might be suitable as children become more socially adept. But for now, children need to learn how to be kids again.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my 2021 field work, I am reminded of the six-word memoirs that my students wrote at the beginning of the year. This project was inspired by American novelist Ernest Hemingway, who was asked to write a full story in six short words. My students composed thoughtful and creative pieces about a range of topics, from meaningful life events to after-school hobbies. One student wrote about falling out of his chair at school. However, one memoir in particular struck me as relevant to the research I have conducted over the past two years: “I’m hesitant but have no regrets.” While this student wrote about her reluctance to ride on a roller coaster at Coney Island, this feeling of concern is one that many teachers of young children can relate to. For kindergarten teachers trying to implement play-based practices, it can be intimidating to take a stand against the standardized model that has prevailed in classrooms across the country. It can be nerve-racking to contradict the developmentally inappropriate decisions of ignorant educational policymakers and the desires of well-intentioned parents. But, at the end of the day, teachers know what is best for our children.²¹² They are the ones on the frontlines upholding the fragile state of our education system. Their knowledge of educational best-practices is extensive, including the awareness that learning through play is the best way to teach young children.

The impulse to get ahead and win at all costs is deeply rooted American culture, but our children will suffer the consequences of relentless and inadequate standards and methods of learning. As stated in a letter to the *New York Times*, “Competition can drive us to achieve great things, but it can also result in destruction and damage to the human spirit. Perhaps in the future

²¹² David W. Blight, “Trust the Teachers,” *The Atlantic*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/what-parents-dont-understand-about-teaching-history/620770/>.

we will evolve into a less competitive and more collaborative creature.”²¹³ Play is an ideal pedagogical approach to encourage collaboration and support healthy development. It emboldens children to thrive in a complex, constantly changing world.²¹⁴ Instead of pitting students against each other, we should inspire them to build positive social connections and validate their contributions to furthering the classroom community. We must provide students with nurturing, low-pressure settings where they feel comfortable and motivated to learn. The academically rigorous environments that many of today’s kindergartners are subjected to promote stress and increase apprehensiveness about school, which is not what students need as they continue to navigate an anxiety-inducing global pandemic.

In the face of adversity, play has been shown to help children manage emotions and develop resilience. It provides a valuable escape during times of disruption and offers a sense of normality and routine. Researchers also highlight the importance of play in “facilitating the expression of emotions within a safe context.”²¹⁵ All this considered, I think that play is the most salient way in which we can support students during this pandemic and help them process the unprecedented changes that they have endured and that are in front of them. Play is what children need to connect and heal through this collective trauma together.²¹⁶ I argue that now is the time to reconsider what it is we want to teach and instill in young children. It is time to reconceptualize American education (specifically kindergarten) and put students on a better path. We need to provide students with ample opportunities for socialization and use play as a learning tool. If teachers push past their hesitancy to defy the culture of competition and efficiency embedded in modern American education and institute play-based practices, then their students’

²¹³ Theodore Markus quoted in “How the Pandemic Affected Kindergarten.”

²¹⁴ “Play and Early Learning during COVID-19.”

²¹⁵ O’Keeffe and McNally, “Teacher’s Perspectives on Play,” 80.

²¹⁶ Strauss, “Why It’s a Problem.”

learning and social-emotional development will be enriched. Teachers will have no regrets when their students are achieving positive outcomes through play.

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