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The Effects of Play-based Learning on Early Literacy Skills in Kindergarten

Submitted July 17th, 2020

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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July 2020

Abstract

Kindergarten teachers instruct early literacy skills to some of our earliest learners. Providing effective literacy strategies that offer rich and developmentally appropriate instruction includes providing systematic instruction through play-based learning in phonemic awareness and phonics. This action research study examines different strategies that are developmentally appropriate for kindergartner's early literacy skills.

Keywords: early literacy, kindergarten, play-based, phonics, phonemic awareness

The Effects of Play-based Learning on Early Literacy Skills in Kindergarten

Research has indicated the importance of play for children in their young years for the best development and growth for the future. Albert Einstein even says that “play is the best form of research.” As young as kindergarten, children develop linguistic competence through play. Imagine a kindergarten classroom, filled with blocks for building towers, pots and pans for playing in a play kitchen, and dolls for playing house. Children are playing, unknowingly and untaught, using their imagination, negotiating skills, and socially interacting. Through play, children are establishing the understanding of how language works and will subsequently, understand written language (Tsao, 2008).

Children’s oral language is so important for students' future writing and reading. The building blocks of reading begin with phonological awareness, the ability to hear and manipulate sounds, from words, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Studies show phonological awareness as the strongest predictor of future reading abilities. Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness and is the ability to hear and identify individual phonemes. These skills are vital for students to have solidified before embarking on phonics skills. Research studies have shown that children struggling with reading are identified with having gaps or weaknesses in their phonemic awareness and phonological awareness skills.

One might say that kindergarten is the new first grade. With pressure from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, there has been more pressure on standardized testing and less on play, imagination, and exploration (as cited in Cavanaugh, Clemence, and Teale 2016). The early introduction of literacy skills is supposed to prepare younger learners and help reduce the achievement gap but the National Association for the Education of the Young Children (2009) also calls for a need for integration of play. However, the resulting scripted curriculum and high-

stakes testing have led many educators with a problem to solve--In what ways, if any, does play-based learning facilitate phonemic awareness and skills for kindergarten students?

An urban elementary school consisting of 493 preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade students has 30% of students are not meeting proficiency levels. District level standards require students to achieve 80% or higher on district-mandated assessments. However, students are scoring poorly in phonemic awareness and phonics benchmarks. Intervention strategies for phonemic awareness were implemented and showed growth. Yet,, 30% of students are still behind in phonemic awareness and phonics according to the district's General Outcome Measurement standardized test scores. School District Data Assessment Teams have evaluated and reflected on current school practices and noticed an important pattern: subsequent grades are showing gaps in phonological and phonemic awareness skills. District provided curriculum has demonstrated that it meets the needs of some students but does not reach all.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is a theoretical framework for many educational practices. Constructivism is based on the premise that the learner has their own experiences and understanding that help create new learning. All learners have their own experiences and therefore all learners develop their own understanding of the world's concepts through application.

An early researcher of play, Jean Piaget, believed that play was necessary for children's cognitive growth. Piaget's constructivist theory "identified play as a means by which individuals can integrate new information into their already existing schemas" (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016, p. 362). It is important to note that children's new information includes their degree of success or failure they inhibit (Rosko, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010), Children make sense of their world through play by experimenting with new materials and exploring their surroundings. An

appropriate environment for children's cognitive development includes play (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2017). Problem-solving skills and divergent and convergent thinking abilities support the executive function and build the foundation for literacy skills to be cultivated (Pyle, et al., 2017). The representation of symbols through play connects to the pre-literacy skills students need for academic skills.

Another researcher, Lev Vygotsky, enhanced the constructivism theory by suggesting that learning is social. Vygotsky is known for the social constructivist theory which is described as "what children (or more generally people) can learn with the help of more knowledgeable others" (Van Oaers & Duijkers, 2013, p. 213). Vygotsky termed this notion as the zone of proximal development. It is the idea that between what children can and cannot do, can be done with the help of a more knowledgeable peer or an adult. Vygotsky's theory is what sets children's play and play-based learning (or guided play) differently from each other.

For play-based learning to occur, there needs to be an adult to act as a facilitator for prompting and support. Children will be guided to build onto their existing concepts and create new ones from help from the facilitator or teacher. According to Lev Vygotsky, developmental change in early childhood is motivated by pretend play because of the mental structures inside change from the outside from the strong social push that results in cognitive change (Roskos, Christie, Widman, Holding; 2010). With adult guidance, pretend play and integrated literacy components will result in cognitive change appropriate for this age level.

With using students' prior knowledge and existing schema, teachers can help children build new knowledge structures through guided play. Throughout this study, the social constructivism theories from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky were applied so that the teacher could enhance students learning through play and academics that was developmentally

appropriate for this age group. By connecting age-appropriate academics and play, the teacher was able to facilitate activities to enhance learning while students were exploring and discovering new learning constructs.

Review of Literature

Systematic and Instruction

Systematic phonics instruction is a planned logical form or sequence of phonics components (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows 2001). The National Reading Panel (NRP) and National Research Council Committee (NRCC) on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children claim systematic and explicit instruction is an essential component of early literacy skills (as cited in Campbell, Charlotte, Cooke, Wilmington, 2008). Reports from the NRP (2000) and NRCC (1998) concluded that students who received systematic instruction would most likely be able to decode and spell words over those who do not (Campbell et al., 2008; Joshi, Dahlgren, & Boulware-Gooden, 2002). Juel (1988) along with, Torgesen, Wagner, and Rashotte's (1994) research findings indicate students with strong phonological awareness skills, were "able to read more readily" (as cited in Campbell et al., 2008, p. 268).

Instruction through systematic and explicit instruction has shown to be the most effective in grades kindergarten to first grade by enhancing the reading ability among students (Campbell, et al., 2008). Others, such as Ehri et al., (2001) also found that systematic phonics instruction had a more significant impact on students in the younger grades when introduced early. Also, Ehri et al. (2001) found that systematic instruction did not enhance spelling skills as much as it did when it was used with younger students. One explanation for this could be because it is harder to influence how children read or to shape their reading habits when over the age of 8 or 9 years old (Ehri, et al., 2001).

Play-based Learning

Play has been defined as a way for children to direct their learning through play while the adult acts as a facilitator to enhance and connect learning to the materials being used (as cited in Pyle & Danniels, 2017). How teachers perceive play-based learning decides how play is implemented in the classroom (Fessha & Pyle, 2016). Similarly, Kamisah and Aini (2013) define play-based learning as a way for children to learn through play with the adult as a facilitator but also to enhance learning through conversation with friends (as cited in Asahri & Baharuddin, 2017). Cutter-Mckenzie and Edwards (2013) multi-faceted approach defines play through the interaction and relationships between students and teachers. Play includes activities that are culturally and contextually mediated, and the relationships and activities are not valued based on free play.

A common perspective many have about play is that it is free and unstructured time (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Feesha & Pyle, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). The teacher does not facilitate nor guide students during this time in fear of “hijacking” play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Due to this negative perspective of play-based learning, administration avoids supporting this type of instructional strategy. However, a research study showed that students who did not have a teacher to facilitate their time role-playing did not engage in reading or writing activities outside of this time (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

The overlapping themes in the literature on play-based learning are complex and inconsistent. In this literature review, play-based learning will be defined as learning through play, with guidance from an adult, to facilitate and extend learning through powerful relationships, materials, and activities (Feesha & Pyle, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Teachers can implement play-based learning through games that intentionally target literacy skills through rich, integrated curriculum and instructional materials of high quality (Paciga, Hoffman, & Teale; 2011; Pyle, et al., 2018). Cavanaugh et al. (2016) researched the use of games for 15 minutes once a day for three weeks with two similar kindergarten classrooms that focused on phonics and phonemic awareness skills. Two different groups were studied with a control group that kept the same rules from the teacher throughout, and the experimental group that had the same rules but were able to change them as the weeks went on. The experimental group that was able to create and add on to existing rules made more gains than the control group that kept the same rules established by the teacher. The experimental group made more gains in phonics and phonemic awareness skills, engaged in more cooperation between members of the group, and were able to practice emotional self-control.

The experimental group also practiced more narrative development and language advancement because they used fantasy as a way to practice their oral language skills. Not only were phonics and phonemic awareness skills shown while playing and creating games, skills expanded into time at recess, the lunchroom, and during playtime (Cavanaugh, et al., 2016). The expansion of phonemic awareness and phonics skills transferring into other parts of their day provided more opportunities for students to practice the skill(s), learn from others, and deepen their understanding (Cavanaugh, et al., 2016) Results from the study revealed that students in the control group did not score better on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIEBELS) assessment than those who were in the experimental group (Cavanaugh et al., 2016). When the teacher's role is used as a way to enhance student learning, engagement in developmentally appropriate play is maintained while teacher-directed components are emphasized and effective.

Chin and Effandi (2015) researched and concluded that game-based learning enhances positive learning behaviors, prosocial behavior, and self-regulation as an effective strategy to play-based learning (as cited in Mohamad Ashari & Baharuddin, 2017). Similarly, self-regulation, prosocial behaviors, increased engagement, enhanced oral language and transfer of skills to reading and writing time were all observed during role-play in a dramatic play center (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Pyle and Danniels (2017) noted students who did not have an adult as a facilitator during role-play only exhibited enhanced oral language and self-regulation behaviors.

In addition to increased literacy and math scores, language skills were advanced when literacy materials and teacher involvement was added to play settings in the classroom (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Both factors contributed to children's increased engagement and enhanced the children's pretend play scenarios. The teacher's role supported children's conversation with literacy components and children reinforced concepts through play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Overlapping themes reveal that students with teacher-guided play benefited more than unstructured free play.

A study completed by Van Oers and Duikers (2013) suggests theme-based centers as an effective way to implement play-based strategies. In this study, themes were created for six to eight weeks, and children would adopt roles, learn about rules, use tools, and learn about sociocultural practice (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Similar to Mohamad Ashari and Baharudin, (2017), a specific interest of the children or stimulation would provide motivation and engagement to students. In the 6-8 weeks, students improved in participation, focusing on writing numbers, words, and building social relationships with their classmates and transfer skills to other parts of their learning day (Van Oers & Dujkers, 2013). Paciga et al. (2011) concur with Mohamad Ashari and Baharudin (2017), and Van Oers and Duikers (2013) in that when a

curricular theme was integrated, multiple opportunities provided productive and high-quality conversations from the teacher or assistant for language exposure.

The purpose of this review was to analyze the use of systematic instruction and the use of play-based learning as effective literacy strategies for kindergarteners. These strategies are proven to be effective, and they stay away from the skill and drill worksheets. Developmentally appropriate strategies like these allow educators to teach in a way that increases academics while thinking of the child holistically. However, gaps in the literature show that there is a need for more extensive and current up to date research for play-based learning. The research shows and analyzes many benefits of play-based learning and outcomes that come from this approach but from a limited amount of teachers and classrooms, especially for graders older than kindergarten. Although limitations arise, such as barriers to training, expenses, and pressure from administrators, it is essential to look at what is best for students in regards to learning.

Methodology

There were multiple quantitative and qualitative pieces of data given in during this action research project. Pre and post-assessments were given to students before and after this study to analyze the effectiveness of newly implemented strategies. In addition to teacher-made assessments, observational notes and student surveys (See Appendix B) were used. More quantitative data was collected at the beginning of this study through the districts Reading General Outcome Measurement (GOM)'s and Fastbridge aReading standardized assessments. Due to Covid-19, two standardized assessments were not conducted at the end as planned for this research study.

The population for this action research was kindergarten students enrolled in a rural pre-k-first grade elementary school. In this sample, there were 23 students from the middle of

January to the end of February. This sample included 12 females and 11 males. Of these 23 students, one student received special education services. The study was integrated into regular classroom instruction and was used alongside the district's provided curriculum.

Pre- and post assessment were taken at the beginning of the study and the end. Students were tested on their phonemic awareness and phonics skills. These skills included rhyming, syllables, blending, segmenting, and fluency skills. This assessment came from the Kindergarten Data Assessment Binder created by the Data Assessment team . Each assessment was taken one on one with a teacher. Students were sat down individually and asked the same questions and were expected to answer the same questions besides when asked, “tell me a word that rhymes with _____.”

Another data tool that was used during this research project was observational notes (See Appendix A) taken by the teacher during the intervention time . Observational notes (See Appendix A) included observation of what the students were doing, feeling, and saying during the time of the activity or game . The goal of the observational notes (See Appendix A) was to observe if any, cooperation, problem-solving, academic gains, and any other possible notes worth taking.

At the end of each game or activity, all students were administered a study survey. The survey asked questions about the game or activity they engaged in. The survey asked students questions that would inform if they liked the games or activities, if they liked the materials, if they would play it again and if they knew what they were doing. Students would answer through filling in a choice of three smiley faces. The smiley face choices were “happy”, “so-so”, or “sad”. Students were models and taught what each of these meant symbols meant beforehand.

Two types of standardized testing were to be taken by students at the beginning of the study and at the end of the study. This data tool would give me a quantitative measure of their academic standing for phonemic skills such as rhyming, syllables, sight words, letter identification, letter identification sounds, segmenting, and blending. The aReading Test is a computer-administered assessment individualized for each student and measures early literacy skills such as concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary. The General Outcome Measure Assessment is facilitated and monitored by a third party through the school district. These assessments were taken before the study began but due to Covid-19, students were unable to take the assessments because of the Minnesota Stay at Home Order concluded schools to be completed through Distance Learning.

During the six week study, one or more new games or activities were introduced to students during the small group reading time. The small group reading time was a part of the normal school day and lasted about 20 minutes long, four days a week. For each activity or game, it was introduced to a group of 5 or 6 students at a time. Groups were pre-determined based on their academic level according to their assessment scores from the aReading and GOM assessment. However, groups were flexible and could be adjusted per teacher discretion.

Each game or activity was introduced by the teacher and “played” or “carried out” by students for at least once. Once the teacher felt that the students understood the concept of playing the game, and the learning target, students were then prompted to change the rules. During this time, the teacher conducted observational notes (See Appendix A) while the students played or carried out the activity . Some activities, such as the dramatic play center, was not played as a game but rather a time where the teacher guided the students in their writing and the set up of their play area. However, it still had teacher modeling and observational notes (See

Appendix A). At the end of each game or activity, students filled out a student survey (See Appendix B) that asked them about the game or activity.

After six weeks, students were given the post-assessment administered by the teacher one on one. After all results and responses have been recorded, the teacher will analyze pre- and post-assessment scores, identify relations or patterns from the data tools, and determine the effectiveness of the strategies implemented.

Analysis of Data

For this study, raw data was measured for both quantitative and qualitative data. The three primary sources of data collection consisted of data binder assessments, student surveys (See Appendix B), and teacher anecdotal notes (Data Assessment Team, n.d.). The fourth data collecting tool was the aReading and GOM assessment. However, due to Covid-19, the post Spring assessment was canceled and therefore no data was collected. Each student in this study was assigned a specific number that stayed the same for each data tool. Data Binder Assessment data was collected and analyzed through a Google Spreadsheet (Data Assessment Team, n.d.) The number of students was reported into three categories based on their score for each skill. The three categories are proficient, approaching, and needs support. After scores were calculated for each category, graphs were made to represent the number of students in each category.

Teacher anecdotal notes were written using a tracking log on paper and was used during each activity or game. Patterns and trends were highlighted after each activity was completed by all groups. Many highlights included students sharing problem-solving skills, participation, cooperation, and any other patterns worth noting. Student self-assessments were completed by students as a paper hand out. Students completed surveys after each game or activity. Survey

results were recorded for each question into a table on Google Spreadsheets. Once tables were complete, charts were created to represent survey findings.

Report Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of play-based learning on phonemic awareness and phonics skills in kindergarten. This study included a variety of ways to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The three primary ways were data binder assessments that collected scores before and after this study, student surveys (See Appendix B) conducted after each game or activity, and teacher anecdotal notes observed during each game or activity (Data Assessment Team, n.d.).

This research study examined in what ways does play-based learning facilitate phonemic awareness and phonic skills for kindergarten students. One way this question was answered was through the data binder assessments that were taken before and after this 6-week intervention (Data Assessment Team, n.d.). Students took these assessments on phonemic awareness and phonics skills one on one with a teacher with questions read aloud each time. Students were assessed on producing rhyming, counting syllables in words, letter identification, beginning end middle sound identification, segmenting three and four sound words, and blending. Students' scores would fall into one of three categories. In Figure 1, the red color represents the number of students who "need support", yellow represents the number of students who are "approaching" grade level, and the green represents students who are "proficient".

When comparing pre and post-assessments results from the data binder for phonemic awareness phonics skills, students in the "approaching" and "need supports" level decreased in the post-assessments data in all skill areas (Data Assessment Team, n.d.). However, in the skill area of producing rhyme, one student's skill level ability decreased to "need supports" after no

reports of a student in this level for the pre-assessment. Furthermore, all students were reported as proficient in the skill area of middle sound identification which also had the largest change from pre to post-assessment results.

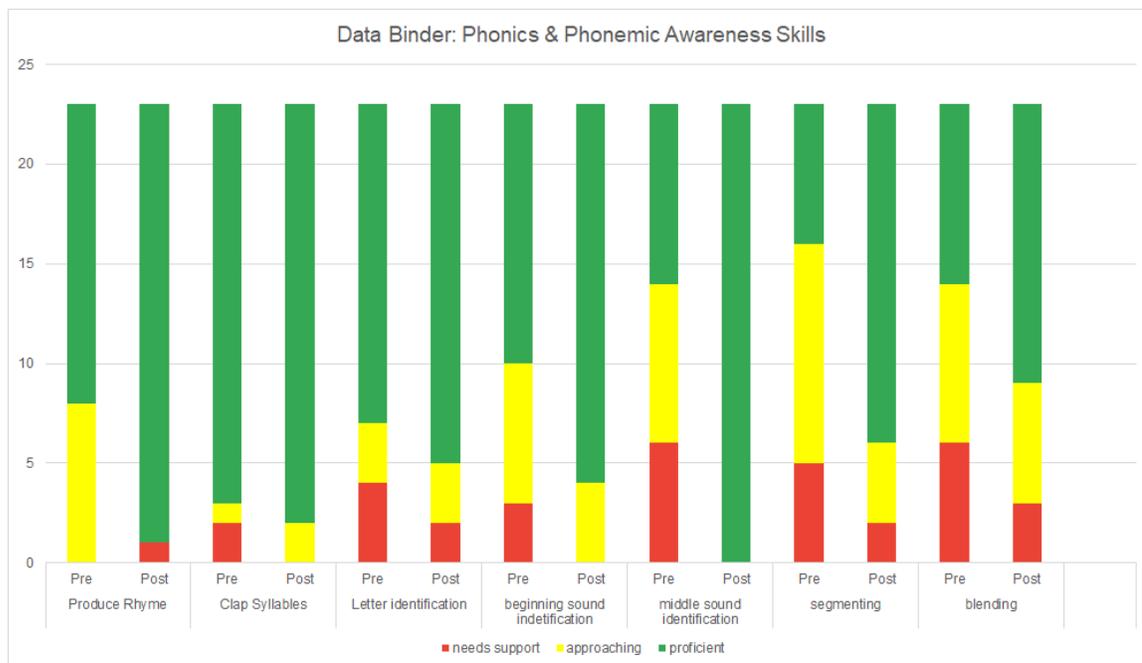


Figure 1. Classroom Data Binder Assessment Data

Another way this research study collected data phonemic awareness and phonics skills is through teacher anecdotal notes. During each activity or game, the teacher observed and recorded in a daily tracker of student participation, strategies being used, misconceptions, errors, cooperation, problem-solving techniques, excerpts of student conversation and answers, and teacher prompts.

The teacher noticed an important trend at the beginning of the 6-week intervention, students were highly engaged with the game or activity especially when students were able to change the rules of the game. Prior to the study, this time was used to reinforce a skill through teacher modeling and students replying vocally or with a whiteboard quickly and focused on one skill. With this study, students were able to answer through story-telling, with open-ended

questions, and explained their reasoning based on their rules for the games they created. The shift from quick one-word answers to open-ended answers with the reasoning behind it was evident throughout this study. With prompting, students were able to extend their short answers to complete sentences that focused on phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Answers that required stories, began short, and became stronger as the weeks progressed. Through guidance with the teacher, story elements like characters, settings, problems, and solutions appeared more and more.

With prompting from the teacher, other students during this time also showed more interest in other students' answers to validate if they were correct or incorrect and if they scored a point or could move their game piece. During this time, students were eager to confirm or not confirm if they had the same, different, or solved their reasoning in another way with prompting from the teacher. It was no longer about who's turn it was, it was about cooperating with each other and solving problems. Students were eager to explain their thinking and solve problems in different ways that they learned from their peers. Students were curious and asked others how they got their answers if they didn't understand. Other students were happy to explain their thinking and reasoning.

Students during this dramatic play center were not ability grouped and assigned at random unlike during the small reading group time. Students were assigned this way to be exposed to other academic level skills. Prior to coming to the dramatic play-center, the teacher had read several read-alouds about "Restaurants and food menus to help build background knowledge. During this center, students were guided through picking food for the menu. Due to students' different academic levels, some students received guidance according to their academic level. For example, students who were still working on beginning sounds were instructed to draw

a picture of the food and label it with the beginning sound first and then guided with stretching out the sounds they hear in the rest of the word. Some students were prompted to stretch the whole word with sounds they hear and other students were prompted with higher level phonics skills such as vowel pairs and digraphs.

During this time, it was observed that students would help other students when needing help and the teacher was with other students. Students were able to help and explain in a child-friendly manner for struggling students. Struggling students were able to hear from their peers how to solve phonics skills in a different way. During play, students began playing "Restaurant" but needed assistance on how a "Restaurant" works. With guidance from the teacher, students were reminded of and referred back to the read alouds read prior to this center. Once reminded, students were able to continue playing and closely followed examples in the book. Several times, students referred back to characters from the story and said aloud that they're going to do the same things. "Restaurant" related vocabulary was often used and supported by the teacher this time. When the dramatic play-center did not have the items wanted or needed students either drew pictures or created them from the block center.

When the dramatic play-center time was over, students were eager to play during play-time at the end of the day. Although a teacher was not at the dramatic play-center with undivided attention to this area, students were continuing their play from earlier. Recess was another time that students continued to play "Restaurant" and invited other classmates from other classrooms to play. Many students who did not often participate or be seen as "leaders" to their classmates were explaining how a "Restaurant" works and what it needs to run smoothly. Vocabulary words related to playing "Restaurant"s were also taught to other classmates and students and used during the lunch period.

Another aspect of the study to help answer the research question was through student surveys (See Appendix B). Students were given a survey at the end of each activity or game. The purpose of the survey was to help answer if the materials and games were engaging and appropriate for kindergarten students when used as a teaching method to reinforce phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Students surveys consisted of four questions, “Did I like the materials?”, “Did I think it was fun?”, “Would I do it again”, and “Did I know what I was doing?”. Prior to students taking each survey, the teacher introduced the students as a whole class to help students come up with a survey they would understand. As a class students decided that a happy face would represent that the activity was good or yes. A smiley face with a straight smile represented they didn’t care too much for it and decided it meant “meh”. The last smiley face, which had a frown, represented something they didn’t like or was not good. In *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, the color green represents when students colored a smiley face that represented “happy” with the activity, the color yellow represents “meh” with the activity, and red represents “not too much”.

Figure 2 and *Figure 3* were divided into two graphs due to a large amount of variables. Between *Figure 2* and *Figure 3*, most students reported that they knew what they were doing and would play the game again. However, when students reported they did not know what they were doing, it also showed that they did not want to participate in the activity or game again. The CVC Rainbow slide game had the most “happy” smiley faces reported than any other game or activity. While comparing group reportings, students in the lower academic group reported having the most “meh” or “sad” smiley faces for questions three and question four.

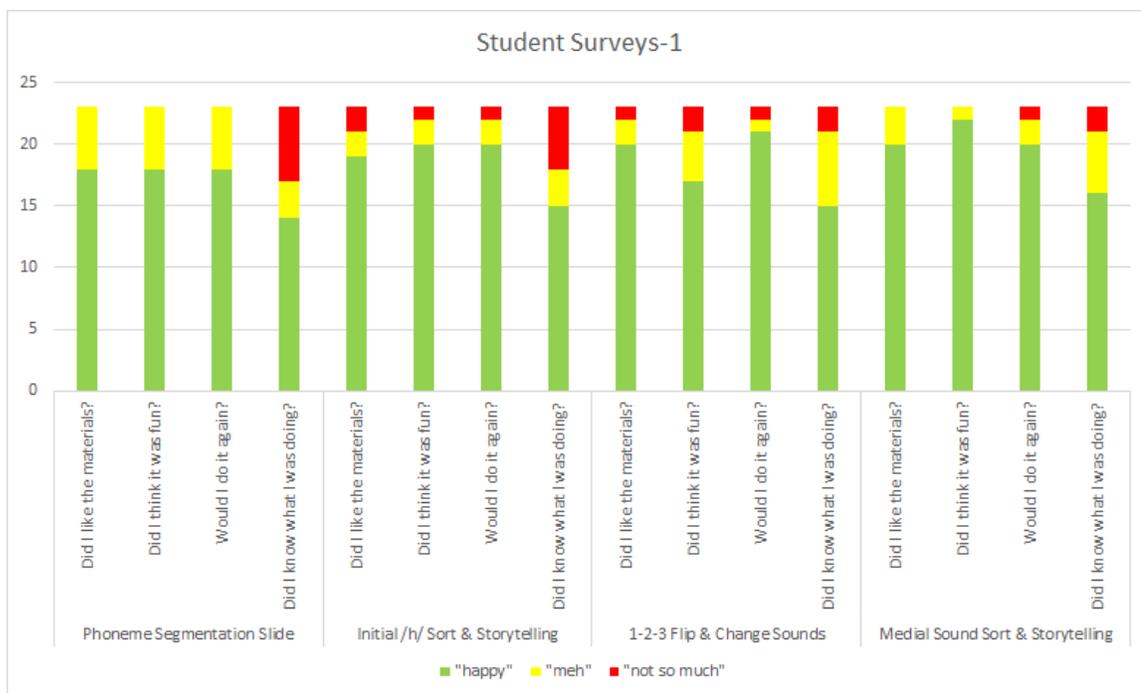


Figure 2. Student Surveys-1(See Appendix B)

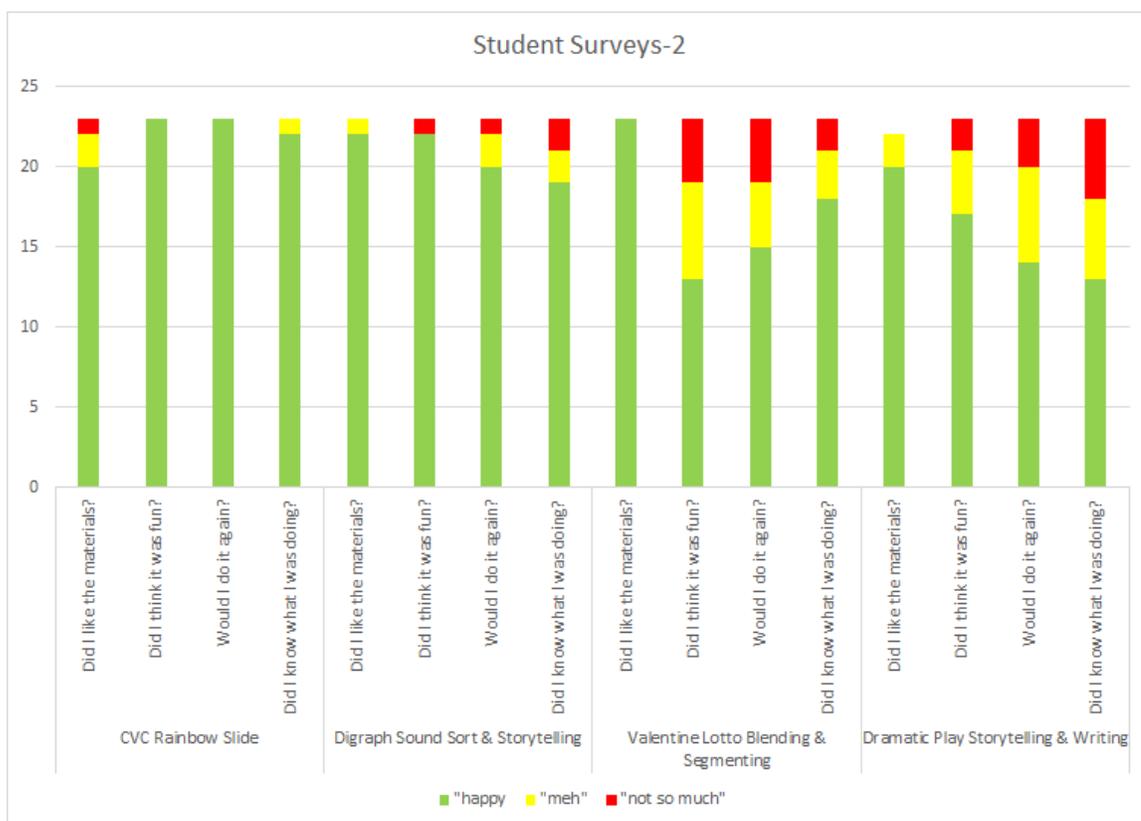


Figure 3. Student Surveys-2 (See Appendix B)

After analyzing data from this research study, there is evidence that play-based learning with teacher guidance has a positive effect on students' phonemic awareness and phonics skills. In the next section, an action plan will be created after examining the data collected. The action plan will include improvements to the current study, recommendations for integration of play-based learning in the classroom, and improvements for further research.

Action Plan

The purpose of this action research study was to examine the effectiveness of play-based learning on phonemic awareness and phonics skills in a kindergarten classroom. In this study, research-based strategies and skills were chosen to deliver effective and developmentally appropriate literacy strategies for kindergarten students. The use of systematic and explicit instruction, developmentally appropriate games and activities, student participation with rules, and dramatic play centers were specifically chosen. After analyzing the data, these strategies were shown to be effective.

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Play-based learning is an effective literacy strategy to teach phonemic awareness and phonics skills when taught with an adult as a facilitator.
- When students are part of creating the rules for a game or activity, students are more engaged and participate more.
- Students learn cooperating, problem-solving, and early literacy skills through guided play.
- Different academic levels during play provide a variety of skills and strategies students can teach and learn from while playing.
- Play-based learning can be used along with current classroom routines and curriculum.

After much examination from the data, the teacher discovered the following recommendations to further play-based learning as an effective literacy strategy:

- Further implementation of play-based learning in other parts of literacy blocks.
- Play-based learning with an adult as a facilitator is an integral piece.
- Adequate training for teachers on play-based learning would clear up misconceptions and provide strategies for implementation.

The implementation of play-based learning into my classroom has changed the way in which I can deliver developmentally appropriate activities to my kindergarten students while still meeting the goals of my curriculum and standards. In the future, I plan to share my findings with my colleagues and provide any help or answer questions about the implementation and effectiveness of play-based learning on early literacy skills. It is my hope that more play is integrated into the classroom with guidance from a teacher and kindergarten looks more like kindergarten and less like worksheets.

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Appendix A

Date	Activity	Goal	Observation	Reflection

Appendix B

Name: _____

Activity:

Did I like the materials?			
Did I think it was fun?			
Would I do it again?			
Did I know what I was doing?			