The Importance of Learning through Play

Susan DeVenny, Larisa Hylok, and Amber Jones

College of Saint Mary

Abstract

The goal of this study is to discover if elementary level educators believe play is beneficial to the overall learning of students. The literature review strives to describe and explain the four domains of play and the benefits of each. By using play in one’s classroom, you can meet a variety of student’s needs. When play is utilized appropriately within the classroom it allows students to learn academically, as well as learn social skills, behavioral tools, and is a great way to minimize the stress on today’s students in the classroom.  The data in the literature review was the initial knowledge for the study on how students can learn through play. The researchers combined what they accomplished in the literature review to the answers that were provided by the surveyed educators. The feedback implied that all of the teachers surveyed used a form of play within their classroom regularly. It is suggested that play is extremely important and there needs to be more of it throughout the school day.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to understand the effects that play has on learning within the developmental domains. Our research was conducted at various public schools throughout the Omaha metropolitan area. The study of play will be generally defined as a beneficial component of learning. We believed that the data would show how ample play opportunities within the classroom will increase all aspects of students’ development in the various domains.  Incorporating play within the curricula will increase academic achievement.

There are differing outlooks on the importance of play in elementary schools. For the last decade, a push for more rigorous academic content has been increasing, causing elementary classrooms to raise their course demands. Classrooms need to be developmentally appropriate and not just focus on teaching for a test or common core standards. Elementary schools are cutting back on funding the fine arts programs and playtime. The cutback has raised questions about the possible effects on student learning. The goal of this study is to explore the importance of play for elementary students. During this project, we pursued the effects play has on physical development, social development, cognitive development, and language development.

During this study, we assumed that all of the teachers who were surveyed were certified and honest with their responses. It was also assumed that the teachers have been educated in the use of play in the classroom, and they knew the definition of play.

    If this survey was to be conducted again, the results would most likely be different with some similar results or aspects.  This would be because the sample size could change, as well as the demographics surveyed.

**Literature Review**

**What is Play?**

Play is a beneficial component of learning. By allowing ample play opportunities for children they will experience great gains in the developmental domains. Children develop physically by engaging in different forms of play; their fine and gross motor development improves. As children play, they develop different cognitive abilities that will assist them in and outside of school.

Play is not simple, it is complex, and the educator can help students build knowledge of play activities when done correctly. According to Jenson (2005), not only can playing help youth learn multiple objectives but it can also boost academic success and improve classroom behavior. Some studies suggest that students will increase their academic learning from engaging in play activities.

While explaining what play is, a great quote was used by Baines and Slutsky, authors of *Developing the Sixth Sense: Play.* The quote is by J. Oppenheim (1984), “Play is by its very nature educational. And it should be pleasurable. When the fun goes out of play, most often so does the learning.”

Through different modes of play and opportunities that are offered through play, children develop the skills to help them manage their emotions and assist in self-regulation. Play helps children develop language skills that will help them in social situations throughout life. Other language skills that improve through play include literacy skills, such as reading and writing. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, recognizes that play is a central component of developmentally appropriate practice (Broadhead, 2005, & Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

    Skolnick Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick Golinkoff; authors of *Talking it Up* noted that:

Play can refer to just about any activity children do that meets a number of criteria. It can range from wordplay, such as rhymes, to elaborate and extended play scenarios. Play emphasizes features that distinguish play from other activities. Play has no specific purpose and is not linked to survival. Playful activities are often exaggerated.

Play is a time to engage with others and learn together in creative ways that also allow children to explore, investigate, and to problem solve. Through play, children can be responsible for their own learning (Broadhead, 2005). Play offers opportunities to work with and observe other student’s zones of proximal development. With proper scaffolding, the amount of help students need to accomplish a task will decrease. The scaffolding can come from either the teacher or from other students. Vygotsky believed that through play, a child becomes “a head taller than himself.” This means that through play children explore and act out different events and scenarios that they have experienced in some way. These scenarios are acted out alone or can be done with peers (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong).

When teachers turn learning into play, their students no longer need to be coerced into the activity. Instead, students become intrinsically motivated to engage in the lesson. By including play in learning, students direct their energy towards the academic goal (Baines & Slutsky). Learning through play is driven by the individual child’s motivation (Lillard, & Lynch, 2013). During play activities, children are involved in hands on experiences. In these hands on experiences children manipulate objects to gain a better understanding of that object (Lillard).

Playfulness is a state of the heart and mind; it involves and creates positive feelings. People who are playful can turn difficult tasks into tasks that are enjoyable and positive. Thus, the importance of implementing play in learning (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers).

**Play Environments**

    There are two specific types of environments that foster children’s play, they include indoor and outdoor spaces. These environments foster a variety opportunities for play. Within the two types of environments, there are different centers that allow for different types of development. Both environments also foster the different forms of play (Roskos & Christie). Within both environments, space is offered to children where they can develop their curiosity, challenge themselves, and engage in physical activities (Perry & Branum, 2009).

Indoor and outdoor play allow children to develop emotionally, cognitively, physically, and socially, as well as gain skills in self-regulation, and language development (Roskos & Christie). Indoor play allows for more opportunities to advance in a child’s literacy skills.

    Outdoor learning experiences offer an extension to indoor activities and an opportunity to learn within their natural environment.  Children’s previous knowledge of the natural environment are all different and depends on what they were exposed to.   Outdoor plant seasons and different elements of weather. They are also exposed to a variety of textures. These different experiences offer opportunities for children to reflect over the event (Burriss & Burriss, 2011). Children can build on previous knowledge and are able to collaborate with their peers, have student-centered activities, be hands on, and construct their own knowledge.

According to Burriss and Burriss (2011), Lillard, as well as Perry and Branum (2009), outdoor play allows for children to engage in real-life situations and to face their problems head on, and in their own way. Children strengthen their existing knowledge when they are able to experience both indoor and outdoor play environments.

    Recess is a major part of outdoor play. During recess, children are able to release the stress of the day by partaking in stimulating physical and intellectual activities. Children who engage in play and other activities outdoors gain respect for nature and the different environments they are involved in. Nature helps restore an inner sense of connectedness with the environment; it helps reduce symptoms of attention deficit disorders, and lowers the level of stress in children (Burriss & Burriss, 2011).

    Within the indoor and outdoor play environments, there are also two modes of play that include structured and unstructured play. These environments offer opportunities for children to engage in both modes of play and gain skills from each. During unstructured play time, children make the choice in what they want to play. Children will often initiate play with their peers (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers). During structured activities, teacher's guide the student’s learning by asking different scaffolding questions; this is done as the adult follows the child’s lead (Skolnick Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Michnick Golinkoff, and Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

**Structured and Unstructured Play**

There are many different forms of play that will come in either structured or unstructured environments. The different forms of play include: self-directed play, make-believe play, role-playing, dramatic play, sociodramatic play, immature play, guided play and free play, rough and tumble play, real play or mature play and symbolic play. Board games, electronic games, physical games, and cognitive games are all used in these different forms of play; they allow for different modes of play and engagement, as well as different learning experiences. Real play and mature play are when children pretend to be in adult roles. In this type of play, children create an imaginary situation, act out specific roles, and establish rules within that play. Children will use substitute objects to symbolize another object for their play, an example that was given was using a wooden block as a telephone. As children play, the roles become richer and more complex. Mature play can also last several days or more (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong).

Warner, author of *You’re It! Thoughts on Play and Learning in Schools,* states that “the American Academy of Pediatrics says unstructured play is healthy;” this is also agreed upon by Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, and DeLong. Through unstructured play, children are able to express themselves in a more creative manner. Within unstructured play, there is multimodal play. This type of play includes using multiple forms of play and activity. Play in a multimodal setting gives children the opportunity to be spontaneous and use the materials around them. Multimodal play is usually the context in which children engage in fantasy play (Vasudevan, and Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

Structured play includes activities such as organized sports. (Vasudevan) When adults set up structured activities, they have academic goals in mind. This type of play is best within the different learning centers. Math concepts, science concepts, social studies, literacy skills, music skills, and physical skills are developed through the different activities that are prepared. Adults have carefully considered the developmental needs and the individual skills of each of the children in the classroom when they are preparing the learning environment (Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010, and Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

Adult guidance can be an important tool in both unstructured play and structured play. An adult can help scaffold children and assist them with activities that the child can achieve with some assistance. Most adult guidance should be invoked through child initiation and the adult should follow the child’s lead (Vasudevan). Some involvement from adults include modeling feelings, behaviors, and steps of an activity in a positive way, which demonstrates to children how they should act within certain situations or how to express themselves appropriately (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, Lillard, and Lynch). The adults will scaffold the children within the centers until their help is no longer needed for the child to complete the task; children are gradually introduced to independence this way (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

**Developmental Domains**

**Physical**

One of the best ways for children to learn is through hands on experiences. Everything about play is hands on. Play drastically influences physical development in a variety of ways, from fine motor to gross motor development, children’s behavior and to the children’s overall health as they grow; physically active children are less likely to become obese (Singer, Singer, D'Agostino, & DeLong). According to a few resources, physical movement can improve the body and has shown to help improve cognitive performance (Jenson, 2005; Hogan, 2013). Therefore, integrating play within the curricula not only boosts health and happiness but it also will help the students perform better academically.

As children play and explore their environments, they develop stronger senses of coordination and balance (Baines & Slutsky, Lancy & Grove 2011, and Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010). When children are exposed to experiences that require using a variety of different physical abilities, they discover what their body is capable of and what is too difficult.

Burriss, & Burriss, co-authors of *Outdoor Play and Learning: Policy and Practice* state that deliberate play deprivation is the same thing as child abuse. Without play, the child’s physical development is impaired and so is the child’s psychological functioning. Through physical play activities, children also strengthen their bones. Physical play allows for children to move and exercise. When children are active throughout their day, they will be more likely to engage in physical activities outside of school (Burriss, & Burriss 2011).

Younger children mostly explore their environments through play and will use actions such as taste and touch to help form information about items, ideas, or thoughts. This type of exploration gradually ends as children strengthen their other physical skills (Singer, Singer, D'Agostino, & DeLong). Physically active play allows children to make things happen on their own and express themselves in the world (Perry & Branum, 2009). Play can cause laughter. Laughter is said to be very healthy for a person. When children laugh from playing, they are using their muscles to laugh and in moving while laughing (Vasudevan).

Physical play positively affects development of the brain (Skolnick Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Michnick Golinkoff). Different forms of play help in the development of the prefrontal cortex, which is needed for reasoning, thinking, and planning. As children physically react to their environments, they are using their cognitive abilities to process the incoming informational messages that are created during different activities (Lynch).

Play allows children to gain their own understanding of events and experiences. It also allows children to become resourceful, they think creatively on ways to react to diverse and challenging situations, and they try to manipulate tools to their advantage. When children play, they have more opportunities to make connections between two or more different events (Alper, & Herr-Stephenson, 2013 and Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers). Through different play experiences, children are faced with many challenges that they must overcome. Because of these challenges, children become very skilled in problem-solving. When children are exposed to different forms of play, they are given opportunities to improve their self-awareness and reasoning skills, children also learn the skills of making choices (Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, & DeLong).

Curiosity is inspired through play. As children become curious about something specific, that internal motivation drives the children to find information and further their knowledge regarding what it was that peaked the child’s curiosity. As children play and manipulate their activities through hands on experiences, they gain an understanding of the skills needed for the task and gain a better understanding of how to use the items that they manipulate within their play. Hands on learning is also known as experiential learning (Roskos & Christie, and Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, & DeLong).

**Cognitive**

According to Han, Moore, Vukelich, and Buell (2010), writers of *Does Play Make a Difference,* through the engagement in different types of activities and games, children strengthen their memory abilities; according to Madray, and Catalano (2010), music has been said to help improve children’s memory abilities. Children also strengthen their abilities to judge, question, reason, and act on their own decisions (Lillard, and Vasudevan).

Pretend play creates opportunities for children to use their imaginations and make connections of the real world through their playing experiences. Children imagine multiple possibilities within their play (Gopnik & Walker). This type of play also supports abstract thinking throughout the playing process. This type of thinking allows for children to devise different ways of directing their play and interacting with their peers (Perry & Branum, 2009,

Through various play activities, children come to understand what is known as *Theory of Mind* or meta*-cognition*. This is when children realize that people develop their own ways of thinking. When children are at this point, they begin to think of how others perceive them (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, the authors of *Perspectives of Play in Three Nations wrote,* “playfulness provides a way of looking at things from different perspectives rather than thinking of a problem being something very hard to work out, or it is a way of coming up with different solutions.” This means that through play, children develop the ability to look at situations from different perspectives; the child might not always agree with every different perspective (Perry, & Branum, 2009, and Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, & DeLong).

**Social-emotional**

Lynch, the author of *More Play, Please*, states that human intelligence is mainly socially developed. As long as mankind has been in existence, man has always shared and communicated with one another. Within group settings or activities, children are always creating rules. Sometimes the rules can cause arguments, which the children work together to solve (Lancy, & Grove, 2011).

Play creates numerous opportunities where children can develop their social skills. Through play, children are collaborating with one another, as well as cooperating with each other (Addo & Castle, 2015). Children will discuss their plans for how they will play, before they even get toys out to begin playing. Many times this will mean rules are made and jobs are given within the play setting (Broadhead 2005).

There are four different domains of play. They include the Associative Domain, Social Domain, Highly Social Domain, and Cooperative Domain.  These four domains relate play to social situations. In the Associative Domain, students watch their peers and will imitate play. In this domain the children use a lot of self-talk and will play alongside a peer, also known as parallel play. In the Social Domain, children will be playing together, sharing objects, and collaboration between peers. Children that are in the Highly Social Domain give and receive objects with peers, make comments regarding the activity, and creating and following rules within play. When children are in the Cooperative Domain, they play using themes, set shared goals and can problem solve (Broadhead, 2005).

Children gain the skills to read other people’s body language through different forms of play. They also develop the ability to reconcile differences and can begin to evaluate situations from different perspectives. The ability to read other’s body language and to be able to work through issues, children begin making friends with children their own age and other ages as well. Children are challenged when it comes to maintaining friendships and seeking out new friends (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

When children engage in different play activities with their peers, they are able to assist each other in learning and completing a task, as well as encouraging their peers to work their best (Gopnik, & Walker). There are three phases that children go through when initiating play. The first phase is for the child to initiate the play and the children come to agree on playing. The second phase is when the children negotiate what and how they will play. Their third phase is enactment, this is when the children will change or add ideas or themes into their play (Perry & Branum, 2009).

As children play with their peers, they learn to be considerate to others and they learn how to work in groups with others. Children are also more likely to be creative when they are talking and playing with their friends (Lillard). Another social skill that children develop through play is gamesmanship, this is how children react during different types of play. Gamesmanship can be negative but if properly modeled and encourage, it can be a very positive turn out for the child (Lancy, & Grove, 2011).

There are two types of social free play, they are sociodramatic and rough and tumble. These types of play can be done individually or with peers, or even adults. The adult usually offers guidance but will often engage in play with the children. As children grow they begin wanting to engage with others in conversations and in play activities (Lillard). When children engage in play with their peers, they learn to cooperate and act appropriately. Play offers many opportunities for children to teach one another in all modes of learning (Lynch, Spring 2015). It also offers children the chance to practice their leadership skills and their sportsmanship skills, as well as learn about other cultures. (Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010)

**Language**

Language, according to Skolnick Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Michnick Golinkoff, is defined as a “communicative system that encodes meaning through combinations of arbitrary symbols.” Children are said “to acquire the rudiments of language by the age of three.” This is when children can begin effectively communicating with others (Skolnick Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Michnick Golinkoff).

Through different social encounters, children develop the proper use of language. Playing with peers allows children to see what others do and how they may react differently to a situation. These different play environments create many opportunities for children to develop literacy skills such as knowing the alphabet, phonological awareness, print concepts, reading, writing, oral language, and reading comprehension (Burriss, & Burriss, 2011, and Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010).

The best way to encourage language development is through talking with children. The easiest way to talk to children is while playing with them and also explaining things to them. When children can playfully interact with adults and their peers, language will thrive. Adults model language for children and introduce new vocabulary through their communications (Skolnick Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Michnick Golinkoff).

The more words that children hear throughout their different activities, the more vocabulary they will learn. Adults need to be sure and use as many accurate words as possible when communicating with children. Higher levels of language is used by children during activities that involve play, compared to the levels of language that is used when play is not involved in the activity; they will use words such as say, talk, tell, and explain. Children are said to learn words at a rapid pace through a process known as *fast mapping* and word association*.* This works best when the adult links the spoken word to a concrete object (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell (2010), state that Bruner, a cognitive psychologist, discovered that children are introduced to complicate grammatical and pragmatic forms of language through play activities. Through the different types of play that involve books or other forms of reading, children learn the most new vocabulary. As children learn more words, they engage in more literacy activities. Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell (2010) also state that “children who enter school with poor vocabulary often experience difficulties when learning to read. This often affects a child’s future reading abilities. If this gap is not assessed early and a child does not receive assistance, that language gap is likely to widen over time” (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

Adults set up environments so they are rich in literacy. When planning play and learning activities, or creating a play space, teachers think of activities that will be meaningful to the children in their classrooms. As teachers are deciding on the words to place around their classroom, they think of words that common for the children to hear and see in their everyday lives. Words that are rare to appear in a child’s everyday life will be gradually introduced to the children through different events and activities. Often times with the more difficult words, an image is also presented for the children to make more concrete connections (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).

When children have experienced literacy rich environments, they gain skills that assist them in play. The ability to recall stories builds as children are exposed to different modes of literacy. They will often have more enjoyment in the activities that they are in (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010). Through these different experiences, children also strengthen their ability to express themselves in both verbal and nonverbal ways (Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010). These literacy rich environments allow for children to engage in literacy activities independently or with their peers, however, these activities are child motivated and child oriented (Roskos & Christie).

In play, children are more likely to speak and use more than one or two word sentences. Their language gradually becomes more complex as the play scenarios develop. Children are also more likely to use words stronger verbs, and adjectives (Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, & DeLong).

Young children have a great opportunity of learning and becoming fluent in foreign languages through different play activities. Play and music offer a chance for children to get active and enjoy what they are doing. Children want to be involved when the activity is fun. Children grow in all domains of development through play. Introducing foreign languages through play and music is a great way for children to make their own connections (Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010).

Play has an important role in the emotional development of children. Through playing, children gain the ability to personally connect with their environment (Broadhead, 2005). Children can engage in play activities that allow them to express themselves emotionally and because of this, they gain the curiosity and excitement to learn, explore, and live. When children play, they create the environment, and children are successful when they are in charge of their play (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers). Children often engage in reflective thinking through their different modes of play; they often reflect on how that specific situation made them feel (Roskos & Christie).

    According to Warner, play alleviates levels of stress and depression in children. Through different play activities, children will learn to read other children’s body and facial expressions and understand what emotions that child is feeling (Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, & DeLong, and Warner).

A huge component of emotional development includes self-regulation. This is when a child monitors and can appropriately express their own thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Through different play activities, children learn how to be open about their emotions and to share their thoughts and ideas is positive ways (Baines & Slutsky). Bodrova, Germeroth, and Leong, the authors of *Play and Self-Regulation*, say that through different play activities, children learn to regulate their own behavior through following the different rules that different games have. They also say that Vygotsky wrote about how children in play contexts display higher levels of self-regulation compared to children in non-play contexts (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong).

Play offers opportunities for children to gain self-discipline skills, responsibility for their actions, and accepting themselves for who they are. Children can also develop independence through play activities (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010, and Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers).

**Decline in Play**

The decline of play for children is speeding up. When children are not able to play, they are missing out on many learning experiences. When play declines so does the ability to self-regulate, and this leads to potential risk of cognitive and social-emotional problems in the future (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong). The overall health of children has decreased and more children are obese (Singer, Singer, D'Agostino, & DeLong).

There are many reasons as to why play is declining. Technology, sports, and adult managed games are some of the reasons that free play is declining (Lancy, & Grove, 2011). Another reason that play has declined over the years is because of No Child Left Behind, which emphasizes academic achievement over play. Time for play has decreased in schools so that there is more time for reading and math. (Singer, Singer, D'Agostino, & DeLong).

**Methods**

**Design**

The design of this study is based on qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The researchers chose to use a mixed design in order to obtain information in regards to teachers’ thoughts and attitudes about play within the classroom and background information on teachers.

**Operational Definitions**

Developmental Domains:

“the four areas of child development which include: physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and language.”  (Dictionary.com)

Physical Development:

“Physical development is the process that starts in human infancy and continues into late adolescent concentrating on gross and fine motor skills as well as puberty. Physical development involves developing control over the body, particularly muscles and physical coordination.” (Livestrong.com)

Cognitive Development:

“is the construction of thought processes, including remembering, problem solving, and decision-making, from childhood through [adolescence](http://www.healthofchildren.com/A/Adolescence.html) to adulthood.” (Encyclopedia of Children’s Health)

Social-emotional Development:

“includes the child's experiences, expressions, and management of emotions, as well as the ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others” (Cohen and others 2005). Retrieved from (California Department of Education)

Language Development:

“is the process by which children come to understand and communicate language during early childhood” (google.com)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice:

“when an educator meets his or her students at the level they are currently at, with materials and equipment that are appropriate for the students” (NAEYC, 2000).

GoNoodle:

“a website with interactive games and videos that get students moving” (GoNoodle.com).

Wordle:

“A Web 2.0 application that is used to create a word cloud. They consist of visual designs that represent the frequency and importance of words.” (wordle.com)

**Who Will Benefit**

The data collected from this research can benefit school administrators and classroom educators. The conclusion of the study may impact the opinions and decisions of administrators and teachers regarding play in their schools and classrooms.

**Population**

The participants of this study included twenty-two teachers currently working in an elementary school setting. Out of the twenty-two teachers, twenty are teaching in the Omaha metropolitan area, and the other two are out of state. The two who are teaching out of state are from Council Bluffs, Iowa and Jeffco, Colorado.

The teaching experience of the participants range from one year to twenty-four years, ranging between pre-kindergarten and twelfth grade. The grades that the participants have taught include:

- five pre-kindergarten        - eight kindergarten

- five first grade - six second grade

- seven third grade            - four fourth grade

- five fifth grade - one sixth grade

- one high school educator in grades nine to twelve

To protect the identities of the educators interviewed, pseudonyms were assigned. The twenty-two educators will be referred to throughout this report as Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C,… Teacher V.

Demographic information on research participants:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **How long have you been a certified teacher?** | **What school district do you currently work in?** | **How many years have you been teaching?** | **What grade levels have you been a teacher for?** |
| **Teacher A** | 13 years | No | 13 years | 4th and 2nd |
| **Teacher B** | 12 years | Omaha Public Schools | 12 years | 3rd |
| **Teacher C** | 10 years | OPS | 12 years | pk, 9-12 |
| **Teacher D** | 11 years | OPS | 10 Years | 4 and 5 |
| **Teacher E** | 6 years | Ralston Public Schools | 6 years | 2nd, 1st |
| **Teacher F** | 20 years | Jeffco - Golden, Colorado | 20 years | 4th & 5th |
| **Teacher G** | 12 years | OPS | 12 years | Kindergarten |
| **Teacher H** | 19 years | OPS | 17 years full time, 2 years of subbing | 3 and 5 |
| **Teacher I** | 19 years | Omaha Public Schools | 19 years | 3rd and 1st |
| **Teacher J** | 6 years | OPS | 6 years | Kindergarten |
| **Teacher K** | 4 years | OPS | 4 years | Kindergarten |
| **Teacher L** | One year | Omaha public | One year | 5th grade |
| **Teacher M** | 24yrs | Ops | 24 yrs | Pre k & k |
| **Teacher N** | 11 years | OPS | 11 years | 2nd grade |
| **Teacher O** | 2.5 years | Omaha | 2.5 years | Pre-kindergarten |
| **Teacher P** | 23 years | OPS | 23 years | K-6 |
| **Teacher Q** | 6 years | Omaha public schools | 6 years | Kindergarten, preschool |
| **Teacher R** | 24 yrs | Millard | 24 yrs | 3rd all 24:yrs |
| **Teacher S** | 20 years | OPS | 7 years | Early Childhood |
| **Teacher T** | One year | Westside Community Schools | 1 year | K-3 Special Education |
| **Teacher U** | 11 years | Omaha public schools | 11 years | 1st and 2nd |
| **Teacher V** | 4 years | Omaha Public Schools | 4 years | 3rd |

**Analysis of Data**

The researchers used Wordle for initial coding of the qualitative data responses. There were three qualitative questions:

- How do you implement play within the classroom?

- What are your overall thoughts on play and child development?

- What is your definition of play?

This tool showed the researchers common themes and was a starting point for further coding the collected data.To further analyze the data, the researchers read through and compared survey responses and looking for overall themes. These themes are described in detail in the results section of this paper.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study included a specific time frame and a small sample size. The time allotted was one semester consisting of 15 weeks. Due to the given time frame, the researchers sample size consists of limited participants.

**Report**

The findings of this study were presented to College of Saint Mary staff, faculty, and students through the use of an IMovie documentary on Scholars’ Day, April 27th, 2016.

**Results**

In order to evaluate the data collected from twenty-two surveys, the researchers worked together to examine responses and looked for similarities and themes.

Overarching themes of research results: 

**Interactive Play.**A theme that appeared through the data analysis was that the educators all seemed to view interactive play as a benefit for students. Teachers described interactive play in their responses that can be divided into two subcategories: unstructured play and structured play.The participants mentioned brain breaks, GoNoodle, and daily five rotations as their structured play. Eight out of twenty two responses stated that brain breaks are a tool that they use within the classroom to help implement play throughout the day.

Teacher D stated (2016) “Children need the opportunity for play, especially unstructured. This gives them the opportunity to use their imagination and communicate with others as well.”

The types of unstructured play the participants commented about were board games, free time, centers, and recess.  All of these allow for the children to have some free time and play in a way that is not scripted or limited.

The data that was gathered on the theme of integrated play is in agreeance with the information in the literature review in that play activities, structured or unstructured, are very important in development and learning.  These two types of play give students the opportunity to work alone or with their peers.

According to Singer, Singer,  D'Agostino, and DeLong, play drastically influences physical development in a variety of ways. The influences range from fine motor to gross motor development, child behavior and the overall health of the children as they grow.

As children play and explore their environments, they develop stronger senses of coordination and balance (Baines & Slutsky, Lancy & Grove 2011, and Madray, & Catalano, Winter 2010). Jenson, 2005 and Hogan, 2013 stated that physical movement can improve the body and has shown to help improve cognitive performance.

Through unstructured and structured play, children are able to express themselves in a more creative manner (Vasudevan, and Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010). They are also better able to develop social skills, gain skills in self-regulation, and develop strong language skills (Roskos & Christie).

**Development.**Another theme that emerged from the research was that the teachers all seemed to view play as a way to gain developmental skills throughout the four domains. Teachers who were surveyed stated:

Teacher T said “If they don’t get time to play, they suffer emotionally, physically, and cognitively.”

Teacher Q said (2016) “Child initiated and led activities that use all areas of the brain and body to produce learning, physical, and social outcomes.”

Teacher R (2016) had said “Their social interaction and verbal stimulation of play in children is highly beneficial. It fosters creativity, physical activity, social skills, and the use of verbal communication to problem solve.”

Twenty-one of the educators surveyed agreed that play is beneficial to cognitive development in children. One of the teachers stated that they were neutral. Twenty-two participants were in compliance that play is beneficial to language development in children. Every teacher surveyed, intertwined both types of play within their answers.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, recognizes that play is a central component of developmentally appropriate practice (Broadhead, 2005, & Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010).  The research conducted, showed that play is a time to engage with others and learn together in creative ways that also allow children to explore, investigate, and to problem solve. Indoor and outdoor play allow children to develop emotionally, cognitively, physically, and socially, as well as gain skills in self-regulation, and language development (Roskos & Christie).  According to Broadhead (2005), through play, children can be responsible for their own learning.

**Time.**The last theme that appeared in the research was how there is limited time for play within the curricula. When the teachers were surveyed to see how much time the children are allowed to play outside the results showed:

* 9   percent  were outside for less than 10 minutes a day
* 22 percent were outside for 11 - 15 minutes a day
* 40 percent  were outside for 16 - 20 minutes a day
* 20 percent  were outside for 20 plus minutes a day

When the participants were asked, “What are your overall thoughts on play and child development?” A few of the educators surveyed brought up limited time for play as a concern for their students:

“We need more play time” (Teacher N)

    “More. Schools and kiddos need more play” (Teacher J)

    “Children need more outdoor play” (Teacher P)

The lack of play within the classroom correlates with student's behaviors and moods. One of the educators stated:

Teacher U stated ”I think if the children sit in a desk all day without a chance to get up and move around or play then they get more restless and can't focus on the work that they're supposed to do.”

This data shows that all of the participants were in agreement on the importance of integrating play into the classroom. The teachers said that play has a positive effect on student’s behaviors. Educators were all in compliance that play within the classroom has a positive effect on student’s moods. According to Jenson (2005) and Hogan (2013), play improves classroom behavior and by integrating play within the curricula we not only boost health and happiness but also help the students to perform better academically.

According to Burriss, play helps reduce symptoms of attention deficit disorders, and lowers the level of stress in children. We think that  all of the educators surveyed believe how vital play is to their students. One participant  said, “I think if the children sit in a desk all day without a chance to get up and move around or play then they get more restless and can't focus on the work that they're supposed to do. Students need play so they can them focus on academic school work.

**Conclusion**

    Play takes a major part in the overall development of children. When children engage in play, they are challenged on all developmental levels. Children gain cognitive development through critically thinking about what is going on around them and what has already happened, as well as what might happen in the future. Children learn to read body language while they are developing verbal language. As children play, they engage with other children in communication and in the experience. Physical development is greatly influenced by play. There is some form of movement in all forms of play. Through the different play experiences that children partake in, they also develop emotional skills and self-regulation skills.

For children to learn and develop the most, they need to have a variety of play experiences, materials, and space. The more time that children have to play and experience things on their own, the more they will learn. Information that is formed and learned through personal experiences are more likely to be stored in long-term memory.

**References**

Addo, A., & Castle, E. (2015). A Cross-Institutional Ethnographic Project: Mapping Play in Intercultural Communities. *Higher Education Studies,* *5*(1), 1-19.

Alper, M., & Herr-Stephenson, R. (2013). Transmedia Play: Literacy Across Media. *The National Association for Media Literacy Education's Journal of Media Literacy Education,* *5*(2), 366-369. Retrieved November 22, 2015, from ERIC.

Baines, L., & Slutsky, R.  Developing the Sixth Sense: Play. 97-101. Retrieved November 7, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Bodrova, E., Germeroth, C., & Leong, D.  Play and Self-Regulation. Lessons from Vygotsky. *American Journal of Play,* *6*(1), 111-123. Retrieved November 7, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Broadhead, P. (2005). Developing an Understanding of Young Children's Learning Through Play: The Place of Observation, Interaction and Reflection. *British Educational Research Journal,* *32*(2), 191-207. Retrieved November 22, 2015, from ERIC.

Burriss, K., & Burriss, L. (2011). Outdoor Play and Learning: Policy and Practice. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership,* *6*(8), 1-12. Retrieved November 20, 2015, from ERIC.

Cognitive development. Retrieved March 29, 2016.

http://www.healthofchildren.com/C/Cognitive-Development.html

Define Physical Development. (2013). Retrieved March 29, 2016.

http://www.livestrong.com/article/96678-define-physical-development/

Farfax. (n.d.). The Free dictionary. Retrieved March 29, 2016.

http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/developmental+domains

Gopnik, A., & Walker, C.  Considering Conterfactuals. The Relationship Between Causal Learning and Pretend Play. *American Journal of Play,* *6*(1), 15-28. Retrieved October 30, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Han, M., Moore, N., Vukelich, C., & Buell, M. (2010). Does Play Make a Difference? How Play Intervention Affects the Vocabulary Learning of At-Risk Preschoolers. 1-24.

Hogan, C. L., Mata, J., & Carstensen, L. L. (2013). Exercise holds immediate benefits for affect and cognition in younger and older adults. *Psychology & Aging, 28*(2), 587-594. doi:10.1037/a0032634

Google. Retrieved March 29, 2016.

https://www.google.com/#q=wordle definition

Google. Retrieved March 29, 2016.

https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=language+development+definition

GoNoodle. Retrieved March 29, 2016.

https://www.gonoodle.com/

Izumi-Taylor, S., Samuelsson, I., & Rogers, C. Perspectives of Play in Three Nations: A Comparative Study in Japan, the United States, and Sweden. *Early Childhood Research and Practice,* 1-12.

Jenson, E. (2005). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (2nd ed.) Association for Supervision & Curriculum: Alexandria, VA. (ISBN: 978-1416600305)

Lancy, D., & Grove, M. (2011). Marbles and Machiavelli. The Role of Game Play in Children's Social Development. *American Journal of Play,* *3*(4), 489-499. Retrieved November 7, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Lillard, A. Playful Learning and Montessori Education. *American Journal of Play,* *5*(2), 157-186. Retrieved November 3, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Lynch, M. (Spring 2015) More Play, Please. The Perspective of Kindergarten Teachers on Play in the Classroom. *American Journal of Play,* *7*(3), 347-370. Retrieved October 20, 2015.

Madray, A., & Catalano, A. (Winter 2010) The Curriculum Material Center's Vital Link to Play and Learning: What's the Connection? *Education Libraries,* *33*(2), 11-17. Retrieved October 30, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

New APA Publication Manual. (n.d.). Retrieved December 1, 2015, from http://methods.fullerton.edu/newapa.html

No Child Left Behind. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2015, from https://www.google.com/?gws\_rd=ssl#q=no child left behind definition

Perry, J., & Branum, L. (2009). "Sometimes I Pounce on Twigs Because I'm a Meat Eater." Supporting Physically Active Play and Outdoor Learning. *American Journal of Play,* 195-214. Retrieved November 2, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Roskos, K., & Christie, J. Gaining Ground in Understanding the Play-Literacy Relationship. *American Journal of Play,* *6*(1), 82-97. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier.

Singer, D., Singer, J., D'Agostino, H., & DeLong, R. Children's Pastimes and Play in Sixteen Nations. Is Free-Play Declining? *American Journal of Play,* 283-312. Retrieved November 7, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2009). Conceptualising Progression in the Pedagogy of Play and Sustained Shared Thinking in Early Childhood Education: A Vygotskian Perspective. *Educational and Child Psychology,* *26*(2), 77-89. Retrieved November 20, 2015, from ERIC.

Social-Emotional Development Domain. Retrieved March 29, 2016.

http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/itf09socemodev.asp

Skolnick Weisberg, D., Zosh, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Michnick Golinkoff, R. Talking it Up. Play, Language Development, and the Role of Adult Support. *American Journal of Play,* *6*(1), 39-54. Retrieved October 30, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Vasudevan, L.  Multimodal Play and Adolescents: Notes on Noticing Laughter. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education,* *11*(1), 12-12. Retrieved October 30, 2015, from Academic Search Premier.

Warner, L. "You're It!": Thoughts on Play and Learning in Schools. *Horace Feature,* *24*(2), 1-6.