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# Importance of Play: Play-Based Instruction Within a Preschool Learning Environment

**Abstract**

This action research study investigated and compared the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction among several early childhood professionals. A researcher-designed survey was sent to participants in several small Midwestern schools. The participants included preschool, transitional kindergarten (TK) and kindergarten teachers as well as preschool and elementary administrators. The statements on the survey were based on three different early childhood teaching approaches: teacher-directed instruction, student-centered instruction, and play-based instruction. The responses were analyzed and compared and the results showed mixed beliefs about play-based instruction in the preschool classroom. Preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed on the play-based statements while TK teachers, kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators had mixed or neutral beliefs on specific play-based statements.

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Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

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Play-Based Instruction within a Preschool Learning Environment

by

Sarah Sjoerdsma

B.A. Dordt College, 2009

Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center IA  
May, 2016

The Importance of Play:  
Play-Based Instruction within a Preschool Learning Environment.

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04/20/2016

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04/20/2016  
Date

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### **Abstract**

This action research study investigated and compared the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction among several early childhood professionals. A researcher-designed survey was sent to participants in several small Midwestern schools. The participants included preschool, transitional kindergarten (TK) and kindergarten teachers as well as preschool and elementary administrators. The statements on the survey were based on three different early childhood teaching approaches: teacher-directed instruction, student-centered instruction, and play-based instruction. The responses were analyzed and compared and the results showed mixed beliefs about play-based instruction in the preschool classroom. Preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed on the play-based statements while TK teachers, kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators had mixed or neutral beliefs on specific play-based statements.

Preschool is about "...children who 'wonder if...' imagine, create, fail, discover, manage conflict, solve problems, try, persevere, help, succeed and love the freedom to lead and learn through play" (Dinger, 2014). This statement came from an early childhood professional who went from being a teacher-directed teacher, to being a play-based teacher. This teacher illustrates how understanding of instructional approaches in preschool education have changed over time.

Early childhood education has progressed throughout the years. Many influential scholars including Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Froebel, and Rousseau, have developed philosophies about early childhood education. Their thoughts are explored and utilized in classrooms today and impact the philosophies of many early childhood educators.

As with all levels of education, there are multiple approaches to teaching in early childhood education. One approach, teacher-directed instruction, focuses on teaching specific skills directly to children. When Froebel established kindergarten more than 150 years ago, play was a big focus, but it was not free play; instead it was highly teacher-directed.

Over time, as more early childhood programs developed, teacher-directed instruction became more student-centered and play-based (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). In student-centered classrooms, students are directly involved and invested in the discovery of their own knowledge (Iowa Core, 2010). Active learning and cooperative learning are also a big part of student-centered classrooms.

Play-based instruction is very similar to student-centered instruction, but is specifically geared toward preschool and has a focus on play. Through play, children create, adapt, explore, experiment, learn, communicate, socialize, and problem solve (Vygotsky, 1978). Play allows children to build and extend their knowledge and skills as they interact with their environment, with others, and on their own (Glover, 1999).

Creative Curriculum, a research-based curriculum for early childhood, adopts the latest research in early childhood and supports the value of play. “Purposeful, engaging play is an important vehicle for children’s learning. When they play in meaningful ways, children learn about themselves, other people, and the world around them.” (Bickart, Colker, Dodge, & Heroman, 2010b, p. 9)

Many preschools follow state curricula and are required to meet certain standards through play-based instruction. Kindergarten teachers are required to meet standards as well. Lynch (2015) noted that there is a pressure for kindergarten teachers to meet these standards and therefore, focus mainly on academics. There are mixed opinions about play in preschool because some kindergarten teachers and administrators may perceive that preschoolers are not academically prepared for kindergarten through play-based instruction.

Of course, educators desire the best transition for preschool students into kindergarten. To investigate the local, current perceptions regarding preschool instruction, this study conducted a survey to determine the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction within the preschool setting.

To determine the varying attitudes and beliefs on the importance of play in the preschool setting the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction held by TK and kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators?
2. What are the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction held by preschool teachers and preschool administrators?

3. Is there a difference in the attitudes and beliefs on play-based instruction between TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, elementary school administrators and preschool teachers and administrators?

### **Definition of Terms**

Many important terms are used in this study and the definitions of these terms are listed below. Unless otherwise indicated, the definitions provided are the researcher's own.

*Teacher directed instruction* can be defined as a skills-oriented approach to teaching and the teaching practices it implies are teacher directed. It emphasizes the use of small-group, face-to-face instruction by teachers and aides using carefully articulated lessons in which cognitive skills are broken down into small units, sequenced deliberately, and taught explicitly. (Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, & Tarver, 2004, p. 11.)

*Student Centered Instruction* can be defined as instruction where students are directly involved and invested in the discovery of their own knowledge. Through collaboration and cooperation with others, students engage in experiential learning that is authentic, holistic, and challenging. Students are empowered to use prior knowledge to construct new learning. (Iowa Core Brief 2010)

*Play Based Instruction* can be defined as instruction where teachers provide meaningful, hands-on learning experiences that allows children to learn through their play. Teachers base learning opportunities on student's interests and experiences.

*Teaching Strategies for Early Childhood* is an early childhood education company that provides the most innovative and effective curriculum, assessment, professional development, and family connection resources to programs serving children from birth through kindergarten. (Teaching Strategies for Early Childhood, 2010)

*Creative Curriculum* is a comprehensive, research-based curriculum designed to help educators at all levels of experience plan and implement a developmentally appropriate, content-rich program for children with diverse backgrounds and skill levels. (Bickart et al., 2010b)

*GOLD assessment* is an authentic, ongoing observational system for assessing children from birth through kindergarten. It helps teachers to observe children in the context of every day experiences, and is an effective way to learn what children know and can do. Teaching Strategies GOLD is based on 38 objectives for development and learning that include predictors of school success and are based on school readiness standards. The objectives are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, state early learning guidelines, and the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework. These objectives are at the heart of the system; teachers use them to focus their observations as they gather information to make classroom decisions. (Bickart, Burts, Berke, & Heroman, 2010a)

*Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program* is defined as a program that gives all four-year-olds the opportunity to have a preschool education. The program is state funded so that children will be part of a quality preschool program. Any preschool programs that are part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program must use GOLD Assessment, use a research-based curriculum, follow Iowa Early Learning Standards/Child Standards, and follow one of the following program standards: Head Start Program Performance Standards, National Association of Education of Young Children Standards and Criteria, Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, or High Quality Preschools Issue Brief. (Iowa Department of Education, 2015)

## **Summary**

Current research in early childhood education indicates that it is developmentally appropriate for children to learn through hands-on, meaningful experiences implemented through

play-based instruction. Teachers can provide these opportunities based on students' interests and students' own personal experiences. However, not all early childhood educators agree on the value of play-based instruction. In this study, attitudes and beliefs about play-based instruction will be analyzed. It is the desire of the researcher for greater understanding of appropriate instruction between preschool, TK and kindergarten classrooms.

### **Literature Review**

A preschool classroom is a place where students can discover a love for learning through their play. Current research shows the value of play-based instruction but also shows that there are mixed attitudes and beliefs towards play in preschool from early childhood professionals.

The history of early childhood education is rich and has led preschool education to progress to its focus today on play-based instruction. According to Beatty (1995) child-centered approaches to teaching were advocated already in the seventeenth century. Comenius described how mothers should educate their young children at home with examples of content that would be appropriate for young children. Rousseau took a more radical approach and promoted children growing up in nature and being treated like children instead of potential adults (Beatty, 1995). Montessori believed in natural play activities and observed children playing freely with various materials. Materials, in Montessori's view, were of great importance because she believed that children could gain great awareness of their properties, such as color, shape, size, and weight (Saracho & Spodek, 1995, p. 132).

Owen was the first to suggest children be educated outside of the home, and in the nineteenth century, Americans began to do so (Beatty, 1995). Gradually primary and infant schools grew and were viewed in a positive light. In Germany, Froebel began kindergarten and this led to Americans establishing programs for young children (Beatty, 1995). Although for

many years the views of early childhood education have varied, the education of young children has been regarded as very important. Preschools today are significant building blocks for children as they begin their educational journey.

There are several teaching approaches in early childhood education. One teaching approach is teacher-directed instruction. This approach focuses on teaching specific skills directly to children. When Froebel established kindergarten more than 150 years ago, play was a big part of his model, but it was not free play; instead, it was highly teacher directed (Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p. 2). Rosenshine and Stevens used the term “teacher-directed instruction” to describe this teaching approach in which the teacher is “teaching in small steps with student practice after each step, guiding students during initial practice, and ensuring that all students experienced a high level of successful practice” (Carnine et al., 2004, p.1).

Although teacher-directed instruction can be a useful teaching approach, it is no longer considered appropriate to use only this approach in a preschool setting. Children should experience many ways of learning. According to the Iowa Department of Education and The Iowa Department of Human Services (2006), The Iowa Early Learning Standards state that “Children persist in and complete a variety of both caregiver-directed and self-initiated tasks, activities, projects, and experiences” (p. 63). There is a place for teacher-directed instruction in the preschool setting, but it is not the only teaching approach that should be used because it focuses on what the teacher wants to teach instead of focusing on children’s interests and experiences (Kagan, 1990).

Recent research indicates that play-based instruction ensures that students are, in fact, learning. Gopnik (2011) wrote, “While learning from a teacher may help children get to a specific answer more quickly, it also makes them less likely to discover new information about a

problem and to create a new and unexpected solution” (p. 1). Gopnik (2011) argued that preschool should not be like school and that while adults may think that most learning happens because of teaching and that learning is less likely to happen through spontaneous exploration, in fact, spontaneous learning is more fundamental.

Another teaching approach in early childhood education is student-centered instruction, which brings focus on the student instead of the teacher. In student-centered classrooms, students are directly involved and invested in the discovery of their own knowledge (Iowa Core Brief, 2010). Active learning and cooperative learning are also central in student centered classrooms. The teacher is viewed as a facilitator and a guide to student’s learning. Psychologists, such as Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky have promoted student-centered classrooms (Rallis, 1995). “Piaget explored the process by which humans construct their knowledge of the world, and Dewey emphasized the learner’s interaction with the physical environment. Vygotsky developed the role of social interaction as a dimension of learning” (Rallis, 1995, p. 225). Through the influence of Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky, today’s preschools view student-centered classrooms as beneficial and appropriate. “The best way to help children succeed is to teach them to be creative, confident thinkers. That means offering children opportunities for hands-on exploration and discovery that help build lifelong critical thinking skills and foster confidence” (Bickart et al, 2010b).

Another early childhood teaching approach is play-based instruction. Play-based instruction is very similar to student-centered instruction, but is geared toward preschool and has a main focus on play. In play-based instruction, children learn cooperatively with their peers, the teacher is a facilitator and a guide to learning, and children are directly involved in the discovery of their own knowledge. Rousseau believed that children learned through their senses and that

they need to be guided, not directly taught, by a teacher (Krogh & Slentz, 2001, p. 49). A play-based classroom is not a teacher-directed classroom, rather, it is student focused.

Play is a critical element of the early childhood curriculum. It influences children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Play allows children to communicate their ideas and feelings and to verify their knowledge of the world. Play is intrinsically motivated, interpreted for its own sake, and conveyed in a relaxed manner providing a positive outcome. Play is free and unconscious. Play activities or their origins have always been integrated in the early childhood educational curriculum. (Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p. 2)

Play is difficult to define because there are so many aspects of it (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Educators and philosophers define play differently. To clarify its definition, a set of criteria was given on play:

First, Play is personally motivated by the satisfaction embedded in the activity and not governed either by basic needs and drives, or by social demands. Second, Players are concerned with activities more than with goals. Goals are self-imposed and the behavior of the players is spontaneous. Third, play occurs with familiar objects, or following the exploration of unfamiliar objects. Children supply their own meanings to play activities and control the activity themselves. Fourth, play activities can be nonliteral. Fifth, play is free from the rules imposed from the outside and the rules that do exist can be modified by the players. Finally, sixth, play requires the active engagement of the players.

(Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p. 3-4)

Play is joyful, flexible, and imaginative and vital for children's development. The many theories on play have helped educators develop meaningful play experiences for young children.

The challenge for teachers is to use and maintain the natural qualities of play and also to make sure it has educational value. “Play is evaluated both by the children’s degree of enjoyment and involvement and by its effectiveness in helping teachers reach educational goals” (Saracho & Spodek, 1995, p. 146).

Recent research supports the theory that play is linked to learning. When 4-year-olds were provided opportunities to engage in high amounts of child-initiated, free-choice activities supported by a variety of equipment and materials to explore, at age 7 those children outperformed their peers who did not have such opportunities on cognitive and language tasks (Montie, Xiang & Schweinhart, 2006).

Gopnik (2011) explored how curiosity and imagination impacted learning. In one study, two groups of children were presented with four tubes, new toys in the classroom. In one group of preschoolers, the experimenter presented the tubes to the children and, with excitement and curiosity, pulled on one tube and acted surprised as it squeaked. In the other group, the experimenter demonstrated how one of the tubes squeaked and told the children how the tubes worked. Both groups were allowed to play with the tubes. The experimenters discovered that the children from the first group played with the tubes longer and discovered the special features of the other tubes. The second group had less curiosity and did not play with the tubes as long as the first group did. In response to this study, Gopnik (2011) noted, “It’s more important than ever to give children’s remarkable, spontaneous learning abilities free rein. That means a rich, stable, and safe world, with affectionate and supportive grown-ups, and lots of opportunities for exploration and play” (p. 3).

Preschoolers also learn with creative construction and social fantasy toys. Moller (2015) noted the influence of these toys on children’s play, “Toys, imagination, and the setting are

important factors in the play children initiate, and transgressing the immediate play scenario affects each of these factors” (p. 322). Vygotsky, as cited by Moller (2015), described play as leading development during early childhood and described how imagination during play is key in developing creative skills.

How teachers view play is also critical to effective play-based instruction. Not all teachers view play in the same way. Sandberg, Samuelsson, and Pramling (2003) analyzed the importance of play and the preschool teacher’s view of play. Their study connected teachers’ own childhood play experiences to their views of children’s play today. Preschool teachers know that play is important, but not all understand the pedagogy behind play. The interviewers explored teachers’ memories of play in their childhood, perceptions of children’s play today compared to their own childhood experiences, and their approach to play in their classrooms. Some teachers believed that ideal play was equated to their own play from childhood. Others believed that children’s play today is no different from the kind of play they experienced in childhood and that play is expressive and though it might look different in different periods of time, ultimately it is the same. The researchers suggested a need for an attitude change and that teachers needed to know that play has pedagogical value. Children want to play, and they need to play, and teachers need to understand the importance of play in preschool.

A similar study by Jacoby (1993) identified a problem that dramatic play had disappeared from her preschool’s classrooms. She realized that the teachers in her preschool lacked the knowledge of the importance of play. Jacoby (1993) desired to know what the attitudes and beliefs about play in preschool were for the teachers in her school. The goal in this study was for the teacher’s to increase their knowledge of the importance of play, to extend the amount of play time, and to be facilitators in the classroom. Because of this study, the preschool teachers in

Jacoby's school learned about the importance of play and learned how to create a positive and welcoming environment for preschoolers.

Indoor play only became important after the teachers attended many workshops. The school made a complete turn. Not only was the classroom appearance different, but also the teacher's role. No longer were they sitting and watching for behavior difficulties, but the staff was sitting on the floor interacting in the theme, or they were walking around the room talking with the young children. They had become involved to assist and enhance play. The staff had come to realize that play was an important factor in promoting the children's cognitive development. (Jacoby, 1993, p. 59)

Play-based instruction is an important teaching approach for many preschool teachers, but there are mixed opinions about play in preschool from other early childhood professionals (Lynch, 2015). Lynch's (2015) study on play showed that some kindergarten teachers value play-based instruction and find it developmentally appropriate. However, although they find play valuable, these teachers are under pressure of state standards and the stress of meeting all the teaching requirements. Kindergarten has become more academically rigorous and teachers feel pressure to prepare children for standardized tests (Bowdon, 2015). Some kindergarten teachers argue that students are not academically ready for kindergarten because of play-based preschools. They contend that with too much play, there is not a focus on academics and therefore students are behind on kindergarten curriculum standards (Lynch, 2015).

The public has critiqued kindergarten classrooms because of the academic pressures put on the students (Bowdon, 2015). As a result, play has diminished in the kindergarten classroom. Instead of school districts buying art supplies, dramatic play materials, or sand and water tables, they are buying textbooks and workbooks (Bowdon, 2015). Because academics has a priority

over play in the kindergarten setting, the preschool setting is experiencing the trickle down where many teachers and administrators want students to be more academically prepared.

Current research studies show that play is learning. “Play lets children engage in extended interactions that build oral language, imagination, critical thinking, and social skills. And, recent evidence suggests that, at least for some skills, playful learning is more effective for producing student learning than direct instruction” (Bowdon, 2015, p. 33).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were preschool, TK and kindergarten teachers and preschool and elementary administrators in several small Midwestern schools. The survey was sent to 25 schools and 42 participants responded. The researcher chose to send the survey to professionals involved in early childhood education because preschool was the focus of the study. Thirteen preschool teachers, three preschool administrators, five TK teachers, thirteen kindergarten teachers, and eight elementary administrators participated in the survey. Fifty-seven percent of the participants have had 11 or more years of teaching experience, 21% have had five to ten years, 9.5% have had three to five years, and 12% have had one to two years of teaching experience. The participants were similar in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Most of the participants were middle class, Caucasian, and lived in a rural setting. Seventy-seven percent of preschool teachers, 66.67% of preschool administrators, and 50% of elementary administrators were part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program.

### **Research Design and Materials**

In order to determine the attitudes and beliefs towards play-based instruction in preschool, a researcher-designed survey was administered. The survey was created using the

survey tool *SurveyMonkey*, and is included in Appendix A. The statements on the survey were based on the three early childhood teaching approaches described in this study: teacher-directed instruction, student-centered instruction, and play-based instruction. There were 24 statements in total. Eight of the statements were teacher-directed statements, eight were student-centered instruction statements, and eight were play-based instruction statements. The statements on the survey were answered on a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The statements were mixed and neutral so that the participants could respond honestly and would not be influenced by the direction of the statements. A pilot survey was sent to a preschool para-professional, a TK teacher, and a kindergarten teacher. After the pilot survey, modifications were made to all of the statements to make them more definitive.

## **Procedures**

The researcher contacted elementary school administrators in 25 Midwestern schools and asked permission to administer the survey to their preschool, TK, and kindergarten teachers and also the administrators themselves. After receiving permission to send the survey, the researcher emailed the survey link to the administrators for them to send to their own teachers. After a week, a follow up email was sent to thank all who participated and to remind participants to complete the survey if they had not done so.

After the completion of the survey, the researcher analyzed the results. The researcher compared the answers of the preschool teachers and administrators to those of the TK and kindergarten teachers and the elementary administrators.

## **Results**

### **Research Question One**

The first research question asked the following: “What are the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction held by TK and kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators?” In

order to answer this question the researcher looked specifically at the statements from the survey that were play-based and analyzed those responses. There were 26 participants combined among these professionals. Most TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators agreed on six of the eight play-based instruction statements. There were some neutral responses, but most were in agreement with the statements. Table 1 shows the six play-based instruction statements.

Table 1 illustrates that most TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators had a positive attitude toward the concept of play-based instruction based on the many agreed responses. These professionals agreed that preschoolers should have hands-on learning experiences and should learn through discovery and exploration.

Table 1

*Six Play-Based Statements with TK Teachers, Kindergarten Teachers, and Elementary Administrators Combined Responses.*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Hands on learning experiences are best for students and should be used 90% of the time.	57.69%	23.08%	15.38%	3.84%	0.00%
The best learning environment must promote discovery and exploration.	19.23%	76.92%	3.84%	0.00%	0.00%
Students learn best through touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, and seeing.	26.92%	61.54%	11.54%	0.00%	0.00%
The best learning activities are guided by student's interests.	7.69%	57.69%	26.92%	7.69%	0.00%
Students, rather than teachers, should find out answers to their own questions.	0.00%	50.00%	38.46%	11.54%	0.00%
Student's experiences are essential to build understanding.	38.46%	57.69%	3.84%	0.00%	0.00%

The researcher then analyzed the remaining two play-based statements that specifically related to play-based instruction by having the word “play” in the statement. The specific play-based instruction statements were: “During the school day students must have the opportunity to have at least an hour of uninterrupted free play time” and “Learning happens best when students engage in play rather than direct instruction.” As indicated in Table 2, TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators were mixed on their responses. Most were neutral and some agreed or disagreed.

Table 2

*Two Specific Play-Based Statements with TK Teachers, Kindergarten Teachers, and Elementary Administrators Combined Responses.*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
During the school day students must have an opportunity to have at least an hour of uninterrupted free play time.	7.69%	19.23%	38.46%	30.77%	3.85%
Learning happens best when students engage in play rather than direct instruction.	3.84%	15.38%	73.08%	7.69%	0.00%

In answering the first research question, the researcher found that there were mixed views on play-based instruction in the preschool classroom. Although many participants agreed on six out of the eight of the play-based statements, the two specific play-based statements had mixed responses, which was quite significant. The results also showed that there was not a strong opinion on play-based instruction because of the many neutral responses shown in Table 2.

### **Research Question 2**

The second question asked the following: “What are the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction held by preschool teachers and preschool administrators?” In order to answer

this question the researcher looked at the responses from preschool teachers and administrators, 16 participants all together. Most preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed on all eight play-based instruction statements. The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Tables 3 and 4 show that the majority of preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed on most of the play-based instruction statements. Many agreed and some were neutral and very few disagreed. Based on the data the researcher found that most preschool professionals had a positive attitude toward play and value play-based instruction.

Table 3

*Six Play-Based Statements with Preschool Teachers and Preschool Administrators Combined Responses.*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Hands on learning experiences are best for students and should be used 90% of the time.	75.00%	12.50%	6.25%	6.25%	0.00%
The best learning environment must promote discovery and exploration.	75.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Students learn best through touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, and seeing.	75.00%	18.75%	6.25%	0.00%	0.00%
The best learning activities are guided by student's interests.	50.00%	43.75%	6.25%	0.00%	0.00%
Students, rather than teachers, should find out answers to their own questions.	31.25%	43.75%	18.75%	6.25%	0.00%
Student's experiences are essential to build understanding.	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Table 4

*Two Specific Play-Based Statements with Preschool Teachers and Preschool Administrators Combined Responses.*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
During the school day students must have the opportunity to have at least an hour of uninterrupted free play time.	68.75%	18.75%	12.5%	0.00%	0.00%
Learning happens best when students engage in play rather than direct instruction.	50.00%	18.75%	25.00%	6.25%	0.00%

The majority of preschool teachers, preschool administrators, and elementary administrators are also part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program, which is in place to give four-year-olds the opportunity to have a preschool education. From the results of the study, the researcher found that most preschool teachers and preschool administrators who believed in play-based instruction, were also part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program. This program supports the value of play by requiring preschool programs to use research-based curriculum.

### **Research Question Three**

The third research question chosen by the researcher asked the following: “Is there a difference in the attitudes and beliefs on play-based instruction between TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, elementary school administrators and preschool teachers and administrators?” In order to answer this question, the researcher examined the responses from each group of professionals, and compared them. Based on the results, there were some differences in the beliefs of play-based instruction. The majority of preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed on seven out of the eight play-based instruction statements, while

TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators did not. The data showed that most preschool teachers believed in the importance of play-based instruction and most TK, kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators were more neutral on the matter or disagreed with these specific statements on play-based instruction.

A t-test was done on data in Table 5, and the results showed a statistically significant difference, with a p value of  $5.5 \times 10^{-7}$ . The t-test was done in which the p value would be significant at a 5% level. The t-test indicated that the 16 preschool teachers and administrators agreed more with the statement: “During the school day students must have the opportunity to have at least an hour of uninterrupted free play time,” than the 26 TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators.

A t-test was also done on data in Table 6, and the results of the t-test was a p value of .002, which is a statistically significant difference. The t-test indicated that the 16 preschool teachers and administrators agreed more with the statement: “Learning happens best when students engage in play rather than direct instruction,” than the 26 TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators.

Table 5

*During the School Day Students Must Have the Opportunity to Have At Least an Hour of Uninterrupted Free Play Time*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Preschool teachers/preschool administrators	68.75%	18.75%	12.5%	0.00%	0.00%
TK and kindergarten teachers/elementary administrators	7.69%	19.23%	38.46%	30.77%	3.85%

Table 6

*Learning Happens Best When Students Engage in Play Rather Than Direct Instruction*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Preschool teachers/preschool administrators	50.00%	18.75%	25.00%	6.25%	0.00%
TK and kindergarten teachers/elementary administrators	3.84%	15.38%	73.08%	7.69%	0.00%

In answering research question three, the data indicated that there was a difference in the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction. The researcher found from the results that preschool teachers and administrators valued play-based instruction and TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators have mixed or neutral beliefs.

The survey also had eight student-centered instruction statements. Student-centered instruction and play-based instruction are very similar; therefore, the responses from the student-centered statements were significant in the study. The majority of participants in this study agreed on most of the student-centered instruction statements. The data in Table 7 show there was a belief in the importance of student-centered instruction among most all participants. According to the research literature, play-based instruction and student-centered instruction overlap in many ways, which means that most participants had a positive attitude towards student-centered instruction and the concepts of play-based instruction.

Table 7

*Student-Centered Instruction Statements With Combined Responses From All Participants*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learning happens best when students work cooperatively with their peers.	19.51%	63.41%	17.07%	0.00%	0.00%
Learning happens best when students take ownership of their own learning experiences.	57.14%	40.48%	2.38%	0.00%	0.00%
The teachers' primary role is a facilitator and a guide to student's learning.	40.48%	50.00%	7.14%	2.38%	0.00%
Students learn best when they use prior knowledge to construct new learning	30.95%	66.67%	2.38%	0.00%	0.00%
The best learning environment is an experimental one.	11.90%	50.00%	23.81%	14.29%	0.00%
The best learning happens though metacognition	4.76%	50.00%	45.24%	0.00%	0.00%
Students must be invested and involved in the discovery of their own knowledge	35.71%	59.52%	2.38%	2.38%	0.00%
The most important aspect of the classroom environment is that it be a community of learners	33.33%	52.38%	11.90%	2.38%	0.00%

There were also eight teacher-directed statements in the survey. The responses of these statements were mixed among all participants. Table 8 shows the responses of preschool teachers and administrators on all of the teacher-directed statements combined. Table 9 shows the responses of TK teachers, kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators on all of the teacher-directed statements combined.

A t-test was done on the data in Tables 8 and 9. The results showed a p value of .089 which is not a statistically significant difference. Tables 8 and 9 show that the participants' responses were quite mixed with many being neutral and with some who disagreed and also

some who agreed with the statements. Based on this, the researcher determined that early childhood professionals believed in a balance to teaching, students should learn in a variety of ways, and that teacher-directed instruction should not be the only teaching approach that should be used.

Table 8

*Preschool Teachers and Administrators Responses to the Eight Teacher-Directed Statements*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Teacher-directed statements	7.87%	14.17%	20.47%	33.07%	24.41%

Table 9

*TK Teachers, Kindergarten Teachers, and Elementary Administrators Responses to the Eight Teacher-Directed Statements*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Teacher directed statements	7.21%	29.33%	33.65%	22.60%	6.25%

## Discussion

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and compare the attitudes and beliefs about play-based instruction in the preschool classroom among a variety of early childhood professionals. A researcher-designed survey was administered to several early-childhood professionals in many small midwestern schools. The researcher created statements based on three early childhood teaching approaches; teacher-directed instruction, student-centered instruction, and play-based instruction. The participants' responses were analyzed and compared.

## **Summary of Findings**

Most of the participants in the study agreed with six out of the eight play-based statements on the survey; however, two out of the eight play-based statements received mixed or neutral responses. These statements were specific on play by having the word “play” in them. The two statements showed a statistically significant difference between early childhood professionals.

## **Analysis and Implications**

The first specific play-based statement was: “During the school day students must have the opportunity to have at least an hour of uninterrupted free play time.” Sixty eight percent of preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed with this statement while TK teachers, kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators had mixed responses. With a p value of  $5.5 \times 10^{-7}$ , the t-test showed a significant difference in the responses. Preschool teachers and administrators value free play for students during the preschool day This finding coincides with current research which states that play is a critical element of preschool and influences children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Many preschool teachers and administrators in this study were part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program. Preschools that were involved this program were required to use a research-based curriculum; most Midwestern preschools used Creative Curriculum, which believed in the value of play-based instruction. Because of this, the researcher determined that state curricula had benefited many preschool programs because they followed the most current research in early childhood.

The second specific play-based statement was: “Learning happens best when students engage in play rather than direct instruction.” Fifty percent of preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed with the statement while 73.08% TK teachers, kindergarten

teachers, and elementary administrators were neutral. A t-test was also done for this statement, and with a p value of .002, the t-test showed a significant difference in the responses.

The data showed that TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators had mixed and neutral responses or do not have a strong opinion on play-based instruction. They agreed that students learn best through hands-on learning experiences, discovery, and exploration, but had mixed beliefs when the word “play” was in the statement. The researcher determined that these perhaps these professionals did not understand what play-based instruction looks like in the preschool classroom. These professionals may have believed some of the theories of play-based instruction, but not specifically play itself. However, most preschool teachers and administrators strongly agreed on most all of the play-based instruction statements; therefore, they had a positive attitude on play and believed in the value of play-based instruction.

The results in this study were similar to current research which showed that early childhood professionals had mixed beliefs on play-based instruction. Some of the mixed beliefs, according to the literature, had come from kindergarten teachers and elementary administration being under pressure of state standards and the stress of meeting all the teaching requirements. Kindergarten has become more academically rigorous and teachers may have felt that preschoolers were not academically ready for kindergarten which could be a reason for mixed or neutral responses in the survey.

The results showed much agreement on the student-centered statements among all participants. Because of this, the researcher concluded that most early-childhood professionals believed in a student-centered teaching approach. Play-based instruction and student-centered instruction overlap in many ways. While play-based instruction was very similar to student-centered instruction, it is geared specifically toward preschool and has a main focus on play. In

play-based instruction, children learn cooperatively with their peers, the teacher is a facilitator and a guide to learning, and children are directly involved in the discovery of their own knowledge. Most TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators agreed with many of the student-centered statements; therefore, these professionals perhaps believed in the concept of play, but did not realize that the learning itself comes from children's play.

The teacher-directed statements showed mixed responses among all participants. A t-test was done and with a p value of .089, it did not show a statically significant difference. Based on the results of the t-test, the researcher found that participants did not have strong opinions in agreeing or disagreeing with the statements. The researcher determined that early-childhood professionals believed that there needs to be a balance of teacher-directed instruction. At times students need to be directly taught certain skills, but not for the whole preschool day. This finding is supported by research literature which argues that there is a balance to teaching and children should experience many ways of learning. There is a place for teacher-directed instruction in the preschool setting, but it is not the only teaching approach that should be used.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher recommends education about play-based instruction for TK teachers, kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators because of the mixed and natural responses on the two specific play-based statements. Education is recommended on what play-based instruction looks like in the preschool classroom and how students learn through their play. Many participants agreed that play is about hands-on learning experiences, discovery and exploration, the importance of student interests and experiences, and students answering their own questions, so education on what play-based instruction actually is and how learning happens through play could be beneficial.

The researcher also recommends that additional research be done on the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction among other early childhood professionals in other areas of the state and the country. More research would lead to more views on play-based instruction in the preschool classroom and would perhaps give different results.

More research could also be done on why many TK teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary administrators had mixed and neutral attitudes and beliefs on play-based instruction. Research could go more in depth on the reasoning behind their responses and perhaps their own personal beliefs of best practices in the preschool classroom.

Preschools and elementary schools are required to meet state standards and regulations, which could put pressure on teachers and administrators. Because of this, the researcher recommends that teachers and administrators in preschools and elementary schools ought to communicate with one another to better understand each other's curriculum standards and goals. The pressures that these entities are under could cause misunderstandings. Through communication and collaboration, preschools and kindergartens can understand one another and could show grace towards each other.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the researcher carefully planned and carried out the survey on best practices of preschool education, there were some factors that could have affected the findings. The data from the survey came only from small schools in the Midwest. Schools in the Midwest may have different standards, curriculum, or expectations than schools in different areas of the country. The responses of each group of early childhood professionals in this study may not represent the attitudes and beliefs of on play-based instruction among early childhood professionals in all areas of the country.

There is also the factor that the researcher received a 31% response among participants, even though a follow-up email was sent. The survey was sent to 25 schools and a total of 135 early childhood professionals were given the opportunity to participate, but only 42 professionals responded. The amount of participants could have made a difference in the results. A higher response rate could have given the researcher a better analysis. Because of the small sample size, the results of the study may not represent the attitudes and beliefs of play-based instruction among all of the groups of early childhood professionals and the schools involved.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Statements

1. Hands on learning experiences are best for students and should be used 90% of the time.
2. The teacher's first concern should be the academic growth of their students.
3. Learning happens best when students work cooperatively with their peers.
4. Learning happens best through small-group and individualized instruction.
5. The best learning environment must promote discovery and exploration.
6. Learning happens best when students take ownership of their own learning experiences.
7. Learning is assessed best when students do their work in a workbook or with activity sheets.
8. Students learn best through touching, smelling, hearing, tasting, and seeing.
9. The teachers' primary role is a facilitator and a guide to student's learning.
10. The teachers' role is to directly teach concepts in a step by step manner.
11. During the school day students must have the opportunity to have at least an hour of uninterrupted free play time.
12. Students learn best when they use prior knowledge to construct new learning.
13. Learning happens best when teachers plan and carry out detailed and carefully articulated lessons.
14. The best learning activities are guided by students' interest.
15. The best learning environment is an experimental one.
16. Teachers must make most of the decisions in a classroom.
17. The best learning happens through metacognition.

18. Students, rather than teachers, should find the answers to their own questions.
19. A teacher must make the classroom rules.
20. Students must be invested and involved in the discovery of their own knowledge.
21. Student's experiences are essential to build understanding.
22. The most important aspect of the classroom environment is that it be a community of learners.
23. Teachers must teach specific skills directly to students.
24. Learning happens best when students engage in play rather than direct instruction.