The Use of Fantasy Play and its Effect on Student Performance

by

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ABSTRACT

Play is important to the social development of children. Creative play allows a child to interact with the world around them as they develop their ability to construct and understand knowledge. There is rarely a time when children feel more in control than when they are at play. To some, however, it appears that children's play is becoming a lost art. Children who are engaging in watching television, viewing movies and playing computer games may limit their ability to play creatively. Schools are also pressured to focus more on academic instruction and less on creative free play. This is also evident by parents who are applying pressure on children to become academic all-stars by learning to read, write and do math at an early preschool age. Kindergartens are turning into classrooms governed by direct instruction, mandated assessments and limited opportunities for creative play. The usefulness of fantasy play may be lost in the curriculum of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Literature and research suggest a correlation between the opportunities for fantasy play in the classroom and improved academic skills for children. Children who experience a hands-on reinforcement of learning the basics may apply and retain information longer.

In addition to classroom use of fantasy play, it is also being used in the guidance offices of elementary school counselors. Play therapy assists younger children who are not yet equipped with the verbal skills necessary to communicate the emotions and issues they are experiencing.

A literature review on ways to incorporate fantasy play in early childhood education programs is the purpose of this paper. A summary of findings indicate there are many types of fantasy play that provide a variety of options for educators and school counselors to enhance the learning opportunities for all children.

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Chapter One: Introduction

You have the power to control everything! This is the idea children experience during fantasy play (Kottman, 2001). Fantasy play is a time for children to manipulate the world around them and come to conclusions about it on their own. In a world of adult rules and expectations, children can find an escape by creating their own world and having the power to control it all. Developmentally, kindergarten-aged children often have difficulty thinking through their actions and predicting the results. Because it is difficult for children to understand rules and expectations, role playing and modeling can provide opportunity to enhance social skill development. Children at this age may not be able to sit attentively through a lecture on how they should act and why. Fantasy play can help students learn about human interaction.

Research has documented that many people learn best through doing. According to Arzarello, Robutti, and Bazzini (2005), the way human beings interact with each other and the world around them plays a critical role in their constructing and understanding of knowledge. Many people are able to learn through observation and lecture, but for some it is more beneficial for them to be working directly with what they are being asked to learn.

Landreth (2002) described play as a child's chance to use energy (positive and negative) and practice for life. He also stated that children are expressing individuality while developing inner characteristics, which can become part of their personalities. There is rarely a time when children feel more in control than when they are at play.

Through fantasy play children also learn empathy. They are able to take the perspectives of other children and see how their actions affect others (Pelligrini & Bjorklund, 2004). Another way children manipulate their lives through play is by reenacting traumatic and troubling events. While children are controlling the once uncontrollable aspect of the event, they may gain a better

understand and perspective. Through seeing the troubling event from their perspective during play, children may now see it through the eyes of others, thus thinking of other, more positive outcomes to the trauma. When children realize these alternatives, they may be able to move past the event and learn what choices they have if a similar event happens again.

Landreth (1993) describes the example of a child whose grandfather past away when he was four. The child would insist that his mother take him to the cemetery to visit the site where his grandfather was buried. There, he would bend over and speak to him through a hole that was meant to be a flower vase. This ritual was repeated every other week for two years. During this time the child struggled with an obsessive fear of death and the idea that death is not permanent. This emerged in play while he was playing with a dollhouse and dolls of family members, as the father figured died and was consequently buried. The child then placed a funnel upside down on the gravesite. When the family came to visit they heard a noise through the funnel and the father was dug up and found to be alive.

As Seja and Russ (1999, p. 269) stated, "Fantasy play is often used with children to both elicit emotions and help children develop a better understanding of emotions." Fantasy play is used with children elicit emotions and help them learn ways to deal with and understand these emotions (Seja & Russ, 1999). According to Feitelson and Ross (cited in Seja & Russ 1999), children who partake in fantasy play have shown an improvement on tests of imagination and divergent thinking. Both of these skills are important not only in school, but everyday life. A simple example of fantasy play is the child who uses a new refrigerator box as a house, and later returns to play with the box but this time uses it as a space shuttle. The child is using imagination to create the two scenarios, but also creating two completely different purposes for one box.

Because of advances in technology and easy access, children are spending more time in front of electronics that may limit creative thinking for them. It has become more common for children to stay inside, watch television, and play video games than it is for them to invent games using their own creatively. Instead of having to create a setting, plot or characters, the whole story-line is laid out for them. Children manipulate a character through activities or watch other characters make their own decisions to deal with the objectives of a video game. While this may have some limited benefits, the children have more control over the whole story when they are creating play on their own. Early childhood is a very important time developmentally, as the concepts they learn now will be carried with them through adulthood.

According to Pelligrini and Bjorklund (2004, p. 34), "the vast majority of the research studies of children's fantasy play in industrialized countries have occurred in preschool classrooms." With school time being divided into instruction and structured activities, students are losing the opportunity to learn social skills needed in adulthood (Pelligrini & Bjorklund, 2004). Many of the estimates regarding the amount of time children spend taking part in fantasy play and the benefits of fantasy play are based on children in schools. Fantasy play accounts for approximately 33% of a kindergartener's play. As children grow older, the amount of fantasy play declines.

Schools are becoming more structured and expecting more standard-based outcomes from young students. Because of this, much of the children's free-play time is being taken up by direct instruction. Expectations are also being placed on teachers to cover much more curriculum than in the past, thus students are being asked to work even harder at younger and younger ages. This is evident by kindergarten classrooms moving away from social interaction and creativity toward students learning more in-depth concepts during specified times for the core subjects.

Many teachers have been moving from teachable moments to teaching curriculum in primary grades. There is still an understanding of the importance of learning social interaction, but teachers indicate there isn't enough time left in a day for unstructured play. Some kindergarten classrooms have become so structured that they are required to have an uninterrupted ninety minutes of reading. If it is assumed that an average school day is approximately seven hours long, then a large portion of the overall day a classroom teacher spends with his/her children is consumed in core academic work. Along with the ninety minutes of reading, time for the other academic content, lunch, and specials (music, art, and physical education) have to be included. There is not much time left for children to have unstructured playtime in their classroom. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2008).

In some classrooms, children are being instructed while sitting at their desks listening, while some would argue that literacy and academic learning could be enhanced through play. Saracho (2004, p. 201) believed, "Children's acquisition of literacy emerges when play experiences nurture their understanding about the purposes and characteristics of print." Children are able to manipulate letters, numbers, and words when they are in the act of playing by creating shopping lists, giving and receiving money for goods, and telling stories through pictures (Saracho, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to review literature on the perspectives of using fantasy play and its impact on student performance. The problem becomes, to what extent is fantasy play available to children in schools and how can fantasy play be incorporated in the classroom thus impacting the learning of children? Literature will be reviewed in the spring of 2008.

Research Questions

Upon review of the literature, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the purpose and history of the kindergarten classroom?
2. What impacts have preschool programs had on kindergarten and the children who attend?
3. How can preschool and elementary teachers prepare and implement fantasy play in their classroom?
4. What materials do teachers need in order to implement fantasy play in their classroom?

Definition of Terms

To better understand this study, the following terms are defined.

Child-centered Mindset: Landreth (1993, p. 17) describes the child-centered mindset as an, "approach that makes no effort to control or change the child and is based on the theory that the child's behavior is at all times caused by the drive for complete self-realization."

Choice: A number and variety to choose among (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Fantasy: A creation of the imaginative faculty whether expressed or merely conceived as a fanciful design or invention (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Head Start Program: The Office of Head Start's website states (2008), "Head Start is a national program that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to enrolled children and families."

Play: The spontaneous activity of children (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Time: A measurable period during which an action, process, or condition exists or

continues (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Choice Time: A measurable period during which an action, process, or condition exists or continues with a number and variety to choose among (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Fantasy Play: A spontaneous activity of children in which there is a creation of the imaginative faculty whether expressed or merely conceived as a fanciful design or invention (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Manipulative: to treat or operate with or as if with the hands or by mechanical means especially in a skillful manner (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Preschool: of, relating to, or constituting the period in a child's life that ordinarily precedes attendance at elementary school (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Transition: a movement, development, or evolution from one form, stage, or style to another (Merriam-Webster, 2005).

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

It is assumed that all literature included represented honest answers of the target population. Another assumption is that teachers understand the importance of allocating time for fantasy play that may result in the possibility of less time for direct instruction. Due to limited time and resources, some literature may have been overlooked.

In addition to the previous assumptions, there were also limitations that must be addressed. First, not all types of play are included. Second, not all variables of play such as quality of toys, abundance of manipulatives, gender-selection and stereotyping of toys and cultural representation in play therapy were reviewed. Lastly, research generally reflects adult perceptions, observations and interpretation of the play therapy.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will start with a history of the original kindergarten program in Germany and then follow the development of kindergarten programs in United States during the early and mid-twentieth century. Next, will be an exploration of early childhood learning programs, including preschool, Head Start and Home Start. Following the history of the preschool programs will be an examination of fantasy play with focus on its definition, examples, impact on children, and how play technique differs between counselors and teachers. A description of fantasy play's necessary components and process will be discussed along with fantasy play's impact on children's academic growth and social interactions. This chapter will conclude with examples of how fantasy play can be used as a strategy during counseling therapy and in the classroom.

Defining Kindergarten

Kindergarten was first established and implemented in the 1830s and 1840s in Germany. Friedrich Froebel designed and envisioned kindergarten as a time for children to develop spiritually and for children to work through character development (Dombkowski, 2001). He also specifically excluded the inclusion of the three R's: reading, writing and arithmetic. It appears that kindergarten was a time for children to socialize and learn culturally accepted norms, which would surround them in their everyday life as they grew. Play was at the center of this theory. It was expected that the teacher would be more of a motherly figure, which would foster an environment rich in social interactions (Dombkowski, 2001). The kindergarten concept was introduced to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the beginning, it was surrounded with ongoing debate about its identity (Dombkowski, 2001).

This identity crisis consists of how to clearly define the goals and purpose of kindergarten programs. An essential question was where does kindergarten belong? Was it a part of the

primary grades or was it an extension of early childhood education (Dombkowski, 2001)? The focus of kindergarten varies greatly from one side of the argument to another. On one hand, if kindergarten is part of the primary grades, the students must be prepared with skills to enter first grade. These skills include being able to read and write proficiently. On the other hand, if kindergarten is part of early childhood education, more time learning socialization skills and working on developing creative abilities would result. Proponents of a nonacademic kindergarten hoped that a new type of teacher-child relationship would develop. (Dombkowski, 2001).

Social or Academic Debate

The child-centered mindset Dombkowski (2001) described is that the child is the most important part of education, not curriculum. It is important to remember that each child is an individual and that they develop on his or her own schedule. Some students at the kindergarten level may not be ready for the core subjects of school. According to Landreth (1993, p.18), "a person that has a child-first mindset values the uniqueness of each individual child." He further describes the trust a person has with a child-first mindset is that the child has the intrinsic motivation and power to be healthy.

The National Education Association performed a study of the kindergarten programs established in the United States, in 1925. They found in the 10 percent of schools that had a kindergarten that administrators, first grade teachers, and even kindergarten teachers could not describe how the kindergarten program fit into the big picture of the primary school (Dombkowski, 2001). This also fueled the debate about what was the best path for kindergarten programs to follow.

Students seemed ready to begin their educational careers earlier than their predecessors. Perrone (as cited in Dombkowski, 2001) found conclusions from a 1988 study by The Carnegie

Foundation that nearly two-thirds of parents surveyed felt kindergarteners should be taught more reading and math. The push for more academic challenges continued to be supported by national legislature and by the 1983 summative report "A Nation at Risk," by the Department of Education (Dombkowski, 2001).

There still were conflicting theories about whether or not kindergarten should be academic based with a standardized curriculum or a less structured curriculum with open choice and free play. Educators, such as John Dewey and G. Stanley Hall, presented theories based solely in the development of children in terms of physical and social growth (Dombkowski, 2001). At the same time P. S. Hill, as quoted in Dombkowski (2001, p. 531), stated "detractors claimed that the kindergarten all but spoiled children for the first grade, leaving them physically active but intellectually unprepared."

According to Dombkowski (2001, p. 534), in the middle of the twentieth century there were two prevailing perspectives, "one held that the kindergarten should retain its original aims of free play and personal and social development." The other was, "kindergarten should focus on academic preparation and should have clear curricular and pedagogical links with the primary grades."

The United States education system had traveled through some challenging times during the middle of the twentieth century. Limited funding, mandated testing, and world events were all contributing to shaping the educational system. One of these world events, which greatly impacted the whole educational system, was the Soviets' launch of Sputnik. This event pushed the curriculum leaders into loading much more academic content in the classrooms as possible, in order to compete with the Soviets. Kindergarten students were not excluded in this push to rush academics. Surprisingly, Wilson (as cited in Dombkowski, 2001) discussed the

kindergartens in the Soviet Union as being dedicated to developing children physically and artistically while having a strong base in play.

During the 1960s, questions were asked about the benefits of time spent focusing on character development and social interactions in a traditional kindergarten. This question continues to surface today. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2008) states, "Up to one-third of each day in the kindergarten schedule may be reserved for students' self-selected instructional activities." Should children be focused on nonacademic development, or should they be focused on preparing academically for the beginning of first grade? During this time and into the 1970s, kindergarten programs were out of the spotlight, as a new focus on Head Start programs and primary curricular reform began to surface (Dombkowski, 2001).

Head Start Programs

The Head Start program provides grants to fund child development services. These funds support preschool programs thus enabling children to increase their skills in reading and math so they can be more successful later in primary school. In 2007, Head Start appropriated $6,888,571,000 to fund local Head Start programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Since its inception in 1965 the program had steadily declined in enrollment until the early eighties. Since 1981, the program has grown to nearly 910,000 students.

One reason the program experienced decline and growth throughout the eighties is the occurrence of additional governmentally funded programs. In the late sixties to early seventies, the government experimented with other programs to see what would be the best route to help children who do not have the skills necessary to be successful in school (White, 1981). Two such programs were The Home Start Program and The Child and Family Resource Program. The Home Start program was evaluated four years after its inception and found to be as successful as

Head Start. For one reason or another, Congress chose not to support Home Start, and it was cancelled (White, 1981). The Child and Family Resource Program was also analyzed, along with other early childhood programs, it was concluded that Head Start was the most impressive of all programs analyzed (White, 1981). White (1981, p. 210) states that the "Child and Family Resource Program has not been expanded, but at least it has not been ended." Governmental funding agencies decided that Head Start should continue to receive funds and others should not. Looking at the number of children enrolled in Head Start and the growth it has seen, it appears that importance will continue to be placed on early childhood education (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

The Head Start program has differentiated itself from other programs in the ability to engage parents in their child's education. The program goal is that parents will not only be involved with their children at home, but will also be actively included in managing and volunteering at local Head Start programs. The parents were also learning how to become advocates for their children's education. There are over 50,000 Head Start classrooms across the nation and the vast majority of them are operated in large part with volunteers. Of approximately 1.6 million staff members, roughly 1.4 million of them are volunteers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

Requiring Kindergarten

The greatest change in kindergarten programs came in the 1980s and 90s. During this time kindergarten became a right, not a privilege. Kindergarten became a legal requirement for compulsory school attendance in some areas (Dombkowski, 2001). Because of these changes, kindergarten programs around the nation started receiving more funding. This was a positive development for students of ethnic diversity and of lower socioeconomic status. Schools that

provided the service to high numbers of these students received more funding. Although the popularity of full-day kindergartens was gaining momentum across the nation, their purpose remained unclear (Redelman, as cited in Dombkowski, 2001).

Impact of Culture and Socioeconomic Status

Research indicates that race and socioeconomic status impacted the ability of children to enter school prepared with the basic social and educational skills necessary to succeed. As Early et al states (2007, p.559) "Research has shown that children from low-income families and children of color enter school with significantly fewer skills than their more advantaged and white peers." It appears that when students are given the opportunity to attend a pre-kindergarten program they may be able to level the playing field with their more advantaged and non-minority peers. Anderson (as cited in Johnson, 1996) found that a group of sixty kindergarteners given the Test of Basic Experience scored significantly different. Half of the students had attended preschool and a control group had not. The group that attended preschool scored significantly better academically than the group that had not.

Johnson (1996) also reviewed a 1994 study by Currie using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Currie examined the effects of those who attended Head Start in comparison with participants in other programs. The study found significant gains in attending Head Start in place of other preschool programs. An interesting finding from the study was that Head Start greatly reduced the likelihood a Caucasian student would repeat a grade, but had no effect among Black children regarding repeating a grade in their future schooling.

Finally, Kutnick (as cited in Johnson [1993]) studied the success of kindergarten students in Texas, some of whom had attended preschool and others did not. Johnson states (1996), "The results of the study showed that students from pre-kindergarten programs are less likely to be

retained, closer to being on grade level in their reading comprehension, and less likely to be referred for special education programs."

One important piece of legislation handed down by the national government was Goal One, of the Goals 2000 Act. This goal stated basically that all children will be ready to enter school by the year 2000 (Dombkowski, 2001). Although perceived as an ambitious and promising goal, it encountered many roadblocks. What does it mean to be ready for school? There are many different expectations across the nation at different schools. The Goal One era began a strong movement toward standardized assessment of kindergarten-aged students. Because of this, many children who were not considered successful in school were not allowed to enroll in a "normal" kindergarten, which prepared them for first grade (Dombkowski, 2001).

Because of the increasing disconnect in purpose and consistency, Head Start, kindergarten, and primary grade school programs needed to be redefined. Researchers and educators worked together to design and implement an approach to minimize the disconnect (Dombkowski, 2001). The United States Department of Education became involved in researching the transition experiences of children. Making a transition to a new school can have a detrimental impact on a student (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) go on to say that it can cause anxiety and challenge coping skills of students, especially those that are at-risk. Because of the many differences in early childhood programs, it has been difficult to come up with a model that is concrete yet flexible enough to fit across the nation (Dombkowski, 2001).

Fantasy Play

Fantasy play can take many shapes and directions and look as different as the children partaking in play. There are similar variables in play that can help to classify it. Garvey defines

fantasy play as (as cited in Connolly & Doyle, 1984, p. 798), "typically defined by the presence of certain characteristics, including voluntary engagement, a lack of extrinsic goals, pleasurable affect, and behavioral flexibility." Connolly and Doyle (1984) researched the relation of social fantasy play and social competence. In order to do this, they needed to define fantasy play, and its characteristics. For the purpose of their research they defined play as having the presence of a "fantasy transformation."

Garvey describes fantasy transformations as (as cited in Connolly & Doyle, 1984, p. 798), "children indicating verbally or by gesture that objects, self-identity, or features of the physical setting were being treated in a non-literal fashion." Children start play, not knowing the exact functions of objects. Many times toys are introduced before the child has had an opportunity to learn what it is or how it is to be manipulated. Thus, the children will use the toy however they please, creating the story of their play.

Another example of fantasy play is role-playing. This occurs when making a make-believe tree-home from the child's bunk beds while role-playing jungle animals in the middle of the rain forest. Basically any type of make-believe play can be classified as fantasy play.

Because of the capability of children to be creative and pass time enjoyably, not many toys or manipulatives are needed to have fantasy play. Children create toys out of the simplest materials. A stick can become a spoon to stir. Rocks and stones can be vegetables or ingredients in a stew. Flower petals become bowls to hold the stew.

Yan, Yuejuan, and Hongfen (2005) completed a study in China asking children, which pictures they would classify as play and which are not play. Although, children have creative capability to create play with any materials, the main criteria children used to classify the pictures was if there were toys present or not (Yan et al., 2005). Many manipulatives are

available that can help children be creative and take part in play that are being made-up as they go. Some examples of these are dolls, puppets, picture books, empty boxes and building blocks.

Toys are useful tools to help children engage in fantasy play, but toys are nothing, until the child manipulating the toy, labels it (Landreth, 2002). It is important to allow for creativity and fantasy during play, as children have the power to make their own reality (Landreth, 2002).

This type of interaction, with or without manipulatives, may improve children's academic growth, along with their social and emotional understanding. Bruner, Singer, and Vygotsky (as cited in Connolly & Doyle, 1984) hypothesized that fantasy play by young children is key to a child's growth and development. Seja and Russ (1999 p. 269) state, "Fantasy play is often used with children to both elicit emotions and help children develop a better understanding of emotions." Also, according to the National Research Council (as cited in Saracho, 2004, p. 201), "teachers are able to encourage language and literacy growth using play-based literacy instruction."

Fantasy Play Enhances Learning

When children are offered play experiences, which are rich in purpose and characteristics of print, literacy is truly able to emerge (Saracho, 2004). Researchers have found that when kindergarteners use written language when engaged in fantasy play, increased literacy development may occur. An example of literacy used in fantasy play occurs when a child makes believe that he or she is a father or mother going shopping for groceries. In order to do this a list may be written that might include letters and numbers. Upon shopping for the goods, the child will need to pay for the make-believe goods in some fashion (Saracho, 2004). This reinforces literacy as the child is attempting to organize, write and read a list and then purchase and exchange play money for the pretend groceries. Neuman and Rosko (as cited in Saracho, 2004)

describe children using these functions of literacy in nearly every aspect of their play. This includes when the child is exploring their environment, interacting with others and confirming incidents.

Fantasy Play and Social-Emotional Recognition

Landreth (2002) describes children's play as a way for them to communicate what they are experiencing and feeling at any given moment. Seja and Russ (1999) believe that because play is a natural activity for children, as it will reflect their emotional understanding and well-being. It is believed that children's play often features themes that are of great importance to them (Fein, as cited Seja and Russ, 1999). Seja and Russ (1999) argue that there is evidence of a relationship between children's play and their emotional development. Children who can express emotions in play may be able to identify accurately those emotions in others.

Seja and Russ (1999) found two important pieces of information in relation to this research. One, the quality and not the quantity of fantasy play, had an impact on how well a child could describe their emotions. Second, children who took part in fantasy play were more likely to understand others' and their own emotional well-being. Fantasy play provides opportunities to experience new emotions, along with opportunities to take perspective of others' emotional experiences (Seja & Russ, 1999). Because of their findings, Seja and Russ (1999) concluded that fantasy play is a resource for children to develop an understanding of their own and others' emotional well-being without verbal communication.

The results of a study by Connolly and Doyle (1984) indicate that young children who partake in social fantasy play had developed better social skills and children were also frequently more socially active than their counterparts. Another observation found that children involved in more complex fantasy play had also shown more social maturity (Connolly & Doyle, 1984). The

most telling part of these findings is that they come independent of the effects of age, gender, IQ, and level of social activity (Connolly and Doyle, 1984). This may indicate that social fantasy play is a meaningful tool in predicting the social competencies of a child.

Although the complexity of fantasy play may be an indicator of social maturity, the most important factor was participating in fantasy play. (Connolly and Doyle, 1984). As Singer and Marshall reported (as cited in Connolly and Doyle, 1984), "children in fantasy play are more joyful and persistent and are less likely to express real hostility." Fantasy play is a significant resource in the development of a child. Having the opportunities available for a child to take part in fantasy play assists a child to develop socially and creatively (Connolly and Doyle, 1984).

Use of Fantasy Play by Counselors and Teachers

Fantasy play is a useful strategy for school counselors and classroom teachers. School counselors can incorporate fantasy play therapy into sessions with children in order for them to safely communicate their emotions, challenges or concerns. Classroom teachers can use children's play to further develop academic skills (Saracho, 2004). It could easily be incorporated in choice time, or as classroom mini-lessons. Counselors and therapists are often trained to use fantasy play as play therapy to help children communicate. Often young children do not have the necessary skills to communicate emotions or what is causing problems for them. There are a variety of ways a counselor or a teacher could implement fantasy play.

One reason elementary school counselors use fantasy play is "because play is the child's symbolic language or self-expression, and for children to play out their experiences and feelings is the most natural, dynamic, and self-healing process in which children can engage" (Landreth 1993, p. 17) Landreth (1993) believes that children under the age of eleven have problems expressing themselves verbally. If a child is vulnerable or dealing with problems that he or she

cannot solve independently, it may be significantly more difficult for them to express themselves verbally without the option of fantasy play.

Kestenbaum (1985) believed that young children use fantasy play as a way of learning about themselves and others and the child will transfer those skills to reality as he or she matures. Psychotherapists view children as immensely creative. The Opie's (as cited in Kestenbaum, 1985) believe that children begin life with a creative flair and it often disappears after their early school years. Some believe the educational system focused solely on academics may drain the creativity from children. Kubie (as cited in Kestenbaum, 1985, p.481) states, "The failures of current educational practices imprison the preconscious." Some psychotherapists and elementary school counselors choose to work with children during this creative process of fantasy play to enhance academic learning (Kestenbaum, 1985).

Storytelling is a popular play therapy technique. Kestenbaum (1985, p.483) believed, "it is the most suitable one for exploring the inner life of children." This process has been adapted by counselors and psychotherapists in order to meet the needs of students. Kestenbaum (1985) gives examples of a child using doll-play for story telling, a child drawing and painting illustrations for a story she was about to tell, and finally another child who wrote scripts for radio plays that he would later read them aloud with Kestenbaum. Kestenbaum used these examples because he wanted to show the dramatic improvements that can happen with children who are not addressing their own problems but are coming up with solutions for their challenges during fantasy play.

Landreth (1993) describes the role of an elementary school counselor is not to reshape children's lives or mold them into the perceptions of concerned adults. The child-centered play therapist will trust the student to take the experience where it needs to go. Landreth (1993, p. 18)

quotes Pasternak, "When I hear people speak of reshaping life, it makes me lose my self-control... life is never a material, a substance to be molded... Life is constantly renewing and remaking and changing and transfiguring itself." There are also many misconceptions about fantasy play being used as a therapeutic approach, because it is a slow process requiring enormous time commitments (Landreth, 1993).

It is possible for therapists to devote many hours to play therapy and develop a long-term relationship, similar to the ways of psychotherapist, Dr. Kestenbaum. On the other hand Crow (1989 [as cited in Landreth, 1993]) an elementary guidance counselor had ten 30-minute sessions with 12 individual students. These students were first graders that had been retained because of low reading abilities. After the play sessions had completed, it was determined that their self-concepts had significantly improved when compared to a control group. Another study by Bills (1950 [as cited in Landreth, 1993]) showed significant gains in poorly adjusted slow readers when compared to a control group. These gains were made with only six individual and three group sessions using play therapy (Landreth, 1993).

These studies indicate that fantasy play can be a useful tool for elementary school counselors working with children to improve social issues and academic achievement. Elementary teachers can also use aspects of fantasy play in their classrooms to improve student performance. The following examples come from observations of play being used in a literacy role. It is believed that improvement in literacy will help students across all curricular subjects.

Six Strategies for Teachers to Enhance Literacy Through Play

Roskos and Newman (1998 [as cited in Saracho, 2004]) described that when children play with language and thinking, they may discover the meaning about print. Kindergarten children are motivated to invent their own symbols and messages when teachers provide play

opportunities with language or literacy components (Saracho and Spodek, 1996 [as cited in Saracho, 2004]). If a teacher is properly trained in implementing aspects of fantasy play in their daily schedule, they may find various times and ways to do so that may not have seemed apparent previously. There are different roles Saracho (2004) describes that teachers assume during literacy-related play in children's learning. These roles are constituent, promoter, monitor, storyteller, group discussion leader, and instructional guide (Saracho, 2004). The following is a brief discussion of each.

The constituent role is when the teacher is an equal member in the group (Saracho, 2004). The teacher will guide the children's learning, but also encourage independence and productivity. Teachers monitor their actions to avoid an authoritative role. The teacher in this role will sit with the students and participate in the activity in some way. An example of this is a teacher getting up from a group that is working to erase something that was written on the board without making any comments to the class and returning to the group. This would help students maintain their focus on their work, without interrupting their learning (Saracho, 2004).

The next role is the promoter (Saracho, 2004). This role acts as a promoter for a movie, play, or concert would. They use any means necessary to help children understand the concepts they are teaching. Saracho (2004) lists, props, pictures, stories, and dialogue as tools a promoter would use to help a student understand concepts. An example occurs when a teacher using puppets of a crocodile and elephant to read a story to students that illustrates the differences between the two creatures.

Another role a teacher may play in children's learning is the monitor (Saracho, 2004). Teachers need to avoid verbal and physical actions that may inadvertently interrupt children's learning. An example of the monitor role occurs when a teacher has multiple groups running at

one time while each group is working on mastering certain concepts. The teacher can move fluently from one group to another without interfering with the natural flow of the students' learning. If a teacher notices that the students are having problems with a concept, the teacher will assist them in understanding what is wrong. Once the children see this and correct their mistakes, the teacher then moves to monitor another group. As Saracho (2004) explains, "The teacher makes sure that the children are learning the appropriate concepts and are responding correctly to the tasks at hand."

The storyteller is yet another role teachers play in children's learning (Saracho, 2004). The storyteller reads a story to the children while they listen and respond appropriately to the teacher's inquires. Specific roles of the storyteller are motivating children to predict outcomes, elicit questions about the story, give enough time for student response, check on student comprehension, and reread the story for the children to check their responses and predictions (Saracho, 2004).

During the role as group discussion leader, the teacher takes a more directive approach. The teacher in this role leads a group discussion to introduce new concepts or review previously taught material (Saracho, 2004). As Saracho (2001 [as cited in Saracho, 2004, p.203]) states, "The children contribute to the discussion, which helps the teacher understand the children's perceptions of the concepts that he or she is teaching." An example of this would be a teacher introducing the idea of a picnic with a whicker basket full of materials to take on a picnic. The teacher and students could then discuss what types of items they would bring and what might impact the picnic. Then they could read a story together about a picnic. After reading the story, they can discuss the upcoming class picnic and describe what the students will bring and how the item contributes to the picnic.

The last teaching role discussed is the instructional guide (Saracho, 2004). In this role the teacher assists children in selecting appropriate settings for objects and matching appropriate illustrations with context. During this time the teacher will reinforce the student's correct answers and guide thinking until the desired response is achieved. An example of a teacher using the instructional guide role occurs when teaching children about what objects belong in certain areas of a home, such as a tool bench area or the kitchen. During this activity, the students could learn about where objects belong while learning new vocabulary to name the objects.

There are many roles a teacher can play in children's learning. These are six examples specific to literacy based play. These play opportunities offer numerous occasions for students to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening (Saracho, 2004). Saracho (2004) states, "Teachers of young children need to understand their instructional roles in developing the children's literacy in the context of children's spontaneous play."

Chapter Three: Summary and Recommendations

The information provided in this section will serve as a summary of findings from the review of literature on the use of fantasy play, specifically in preschool and early childhood education. Recommendations for counselors and classroom teachers to incorporate fantasy play

ideas will be discussed as they relate to student success in cognitive and social development. Recommendations for future research will also be discussed. Recommendations for educators are offered based exclusively on literature reviewed at this time.

Summary of Findings

Since the inception of kindergarten in Germany, to the current education model in the United States, kindergarten has been a topic of controversy. During the early stages of its development, kindergarten was thought of as an enhanced social learning opportunity. Under the warm guidance of a mother figure, children could come to learn, practice, and master the social skills they would take with them throughout their lives. As time passed, research began to assess the importance of child development before the age of five, when most students began kindergarten. Thus, there have been many forms of preschool offered to children to assist in preparing them for school. The issue was not over the importance of kindergarten, rather the debate focused on the amount of time that should be designated for free-style fantasy play as opposed to structured time spent on academic learning. Fantasy play was documented to support classroom learning, enhance social and emotional development and prepare children with skills necessary for success in the early elementary grades.

As more preschool opportunities, such as the Head Start Program, have been enhanced, the purpose of kindergarten has become more clearly defined. Governmental and parental pressures have pushed kindergarten leaders into focusing more on curricular expectations, instead of a child-first mindset encouraging fantasy play. Educators, parents, and community leaders continue to debate the age-appropriateness of kindergarten curriculum. As children are pushed to learn more at an earlier age, meet state standards and pass mandated assessments, the goal is to create balance in opportunities for students to maintain their creativity through

designated time for unstructured fantasy play.

With technological advances, children may be losing the ability to create fantasy play on their own. Fewer students are coming to kindergarten with the ability to develop social interactions with one another. Instead of kindergarten being a time of exploring and creating learning opportunities independently, the student looks to the teacher for constant direction. Classroom teachers and school counselors spend time teaching social skills, bully-proofing and respect that used to come from interaction with people instead of technology toys. With technology, including video games, television and computer games, consuming the time of children who used to have creative play time, the importance of social and emotional development becomes an even greater challenge for pre-school and kindergarten programs.

Some kindergarten curriculum focuses more on academic learning than social interactions. The literature clearly supports the argument that incorporating fantasy play into the classroom may enhance a student's academic growth while helping children gain social skills. A balance of both academics and fantasy play is recommended.

Fantasy play is a time when a child can focus on development of healthy relationships and social skills. Troubling situations may become less fearful when the child is in control of what transpires in fantasy play and through manipulatives determine how to express how all those involved are affected.

Through fantasy play, children could work through problems they are facing, as the adult method of verbally talking through problems may not be developmentally appropriate for all preschoolers. Children at this age may not yet be equipped with all they need to sit down and talk through a problem. Fantasy play is an important tool for elementary teachers and school

counselors to consider. Children speak through their play and with the proper interaction with a counselor or teacher, students may manage to solve problems on their own with minimal direction from adults.

If teachers provide proper materials in their classrooms, students can also use fantasy play time as learning without realizing it. Having a cash register in a classroom for students to pretend that they are going shopping while having to exchange money for goods, may help build many literacy, communication and math skills that student will need later in life. It also may give students the opportunity to manipulate numbers, words, and print. Both play and academics incorporated together are important to a child's well-rounded education. Incorporating fantasy play into a student's learning may assist the student academically and socially.

Recommendations for Counselors and Classroom Teachers to Incorporate Fantasy Play

Elementary guidance counselors have a busy schedule meeting the needs of students in one-on-one sessions, group sessions, and delivering whole class guidance lessons. Fantasy play is tool that counselors can incorporate to help meet the needs of students with minimal time use. Research has shown that students show improvement in self-concepts after only a few sessions.

For an elementary school counselor to incorporate fantasy play in their sessions, they should have background training in play therapy. Gary L. Landreth describes many different environments that play therapy may be effective. He suggests fantasy therapy is something that a counselor can do in their office, a spare room, or secluded space where the child feels safe (Landreth, 1993, 2002).

Research has indicated play therapy may be conducted with individual students or groups of students. The counselor needs to maintain a mindset that the child knows best and not to become directive in what the child is doing during this time. As long as there are appropriate

limits set by the counselor and the child knows they are in charge of the time they are together, significant gains may be possible.

Fantasy Play Guided by Teachers

Teachers can implement fantasy play in their classrooms not as a therapeutic tool, but an educational tool. Fantasy play may help students develop socially and academically. In the classroom, students can create play situations where they are using themes discussed in lessons presented by the teacher. Fantasy play can also be a unique tool to meet students' needs across curriculum. As some early elementary classrooms are moving toward more direct instruction, incorporating some create activities may further enhance student learning.

One method an educator could use to implement fantasy play in their curriculum is by creating a functioning store at the end of unit to apply concepts learned in class. This activity could span nearly all subjects and meet many benchmarks and standards. In the creation of the store, many manipulatives would be needed. These manipulatives include toy such as plastic food, money, uniforms, sales pads, scales and carts. The most important item needed is the student's creativity.

This activity could meet math standards by learning about money and how to make change. It might also be necessary for the customer to have a budget to buy groceries. It could also incorporate a time frame in which the customer has to do the shopping. Social studies standards could be meet by having materials from different areas of the state, country, or world.

Discussing which foods come from plants and how different items are made could incorporate science standards. To connect social studies and science, the store could be broken up into different items from the regions of the United States. Cultural and ethnic foods could be included. There could also be a discussion of the foods selected to determine which food group

they are from and if the customer is eating a balanced diet. This example of fantasy play may enhance academic skills. The students would have to manipulate print in numerous ways. This is one example of incorporating fantasy play into a lesson while still meeting state standards.

Another area fantasy play can be introduced into a student's daily schedule is during physical education, art or music. Many physical education lessons in the early elementary classes concentrate on team activities and specific skills. One classroom activity incorporates different challenges to help a group of students get from one imaginary island to another. There were no islands or water in this gym for the students to use. Instead the islands were hula-hoops and the island hopping tools were scooters and jump ropes.

These are only a few examples of ways fantasy play can be incorporated in the classroom. There are currently many classroom activities that allow and encourage students to experience the curriculum hands-on through fantasy play. Incorporating fantasy play in children's lives may help them to become physically, socially, and mentally healthier, while in improving academic abilities.

Recommendation for Further Research

Future research is needed in the area of fantasy play and its use in classrooms to expand upon the creativity and combination of academics and fantasy play. Sharing methods that were successful in one school district could be helpful for other schools with limited funding. Further research is also encouraged in the area of fantasy play and its impact on literacy with students. More research is needed in the area of fantasy play being incorporated in other curricular areas such as math, social studies, and science.

Another area of research to consider is the impact play therapy has in schools when used by a trained individual such as a school psychologist or school counselor. Seeking ideas for

props and manipulatives used in therapy could enhance the skills of those working with children with disabilities or limited English speaking ability. Culturally diverse research in the area of fantasy play is yet another area where more research is recommended. Exploring toys that are found in other cultures, studying how children learn languages and explore social growth between diverse populations may provide more opportunities for researches. Whatever direction researchers wish to pursue, studying the impact of fantasy play may continue to help all children grow to their full potential.

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