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Perspectives of Current and Former Kindergarten Teachers Regarding the Role of Play-Based Learning Practices

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2026

Abstract

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by

Breann Crocker

MA, Wilkes University, 2016

BS, University of Maine Farmington, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Early Childhood Education

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February 2026

Abstract

The increase in standards-based curriculum in kindergarten has led to uncertainty about the use play-based learning to teach to benchmark standards. The problem that was addressed through this study is that the role of play-based learning in the study state new kindergarten (SSNK) curriculum to teach benchmark standards has not been evaluated. Grounded in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in (SSNK) curriculum. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with eight kindergarten teachers in a northeastern United States state. Braun and Clarke's 6-phase process was used for thematic analysis, yielding the following five themes: teachers consider (1) play is learning; (2) the time demands constrain play; (3) standards, assessments, and data demands constrain play; (4) need professional development and support necessary; and (5) support a requirement for their professional identity and autonomy. Participants described play-based learning as the most developmentally appropriate way for kindergarten students to learn foundational skills and as a means for reinvigorating their teaching. The implications for positive social change are that administrator-supported, play-based curricula can strengthen teachers' ability to implement developmentally appropriate instruction, help schools align expectations and supports for consistent implementation, and most importantly, provide children with engaging learning experiences that build foundational and social-emotional skills—contributing to kindergarten success and long-term civic development.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation first to my family. My amazing husband, Ryan, who has supported me through the highs and lows, has shown unwavering love, support, and encouragement, which has meant the world to me. I want to express my gratitude to my wonderful parents, who always encouraged me to follow my dreams, believed in me when I didn't always believe in myself, and taught me that the sky's the limit. Thank you for helping me get here today. To my brother Scott, thank you for always being there when I need help. From tires to life crises, I knew I could always count on you. Renee and Saphira, thank you for all the fun and laughter when I really needed to step back and take a break. Our trip to NYC will always be a treasured memory.

Second, I dedicate this dissertation to all my ASD family who have supported and encouraged me along the way. You are truly more than colleagues; you are family. I appreciate you all more than you can ever know. Tina, my work mom, thank you for the early morning problem-solving sessions, late-night texts, check-ins, and constant support. Kayla, Jess, Cari, and Paula- thank you for being my sounding board, an ear to listen to, and a shoulder to lean on. Sheryl, thank you for being an inspiration and offering guidance along this journey. I am forever grateful that I have each one of you in my life.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my brother Chad. You always said you believed in me and would be there when I walked across that stage. You never failed to tell me how proud you were of me, that I was following my dreams. Even though you are no longer here, I have felt you with me every step of the way. Thank you, big brother, for sending guidance and strength from above when I needed it most.

I dedicate this to all of you with love.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The focus of this study was the lack of understanding of kindergarten teachers' perspectives on play-based learning after being trained in the study state's new kindergarten (SSNK) curriculum, which incorporates learning standards with play-based learning practices. Kindergarten teachers are expected to teach foundational skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, paying attention to national and state academic standards, while preparing students for the standardized testing they will face in later grades. At the same time, they are trying to incorporate developmentally appropriate practices (Brown, 2024). Play is part of developmentally appropriate practice for kindergarten students (Zosh et al., 2022), and this concept is reflected in the development of the SSNK curriculum by the state that was the focus of this study. Positive social change may occur from this study because understanding kindergarten teachers' perspectives of play-based learning can contribute to kindergarten students' school success. This chapter provides background information for the study, including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Additionally, the chapter includes the conceptual framework that grounded this study, the nature of the study, and key definitions of concepts. I also include assumptions, limitations, and the significance of this study.

Background

In recent years, a shift in focus in kindergarten practice from play to academic instruction led to kindergarten being labeled "the new first grade" (Brown et al., 2020, p. 1). The push for standards-based accountability has changed the structure of kindergarten

from a play-based learning approach to an academically driven one. With the adoption of the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, the education landscape shifted toward standards-based education, emphasizing an academic push to raise teaching rigor and close the achievement gap, as monitored through standardized testing. Similarly, in the study state, both political leaders and heads of the department of education had pushed kindergarten toward standards-based and academically focused learning to increase proficiency on state and national assessments. As of 2024, internal reports indicated the study state had not met the academic goals initially established under CCSS.

The adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 granted more flexibility for how standards are taught, and control for implementing standards-based learning was given back to each state. Under ESSA, the emphasis is on using developmentally appropriate learning practices to meet the needs of all students (ESSA, 2015). First introduced in 2017 and amended in 2024, the study state developed a plan under the ESSA that incorporated state learning benchmarks into education programs run through the state to meet the needs of all students and accommodate the way each student learns. This plan was designed to focus on a whole-child approach to learning, utilizing developmentally appropriate learning practices to teach educational standards. The plan also mentioned developing an SSNK curriculum that would focus on the whole-child approach, incorporating play-based learning to teach the standards applied to kindergarten students so they could learn in a developmentally appropriate setting.

With the creation of the SSNK curriculum in 2019, which combined developmentally appropriate practices, including play, with the teaching of state standards, play-based learning practices have been reintroduced into some kindergarten classrooms in the study state. The SSNK curriculum was piloted by five school districts in the study state during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. The curriculum was then made available for free on the state's education department's website for any teachers to use. As of the 2024 school year, there were only about 250 teachers trained in the SSNK curriculum but, according to the early learning director, little was known about how or whether these teachers had implemented any of the play-based practices into their classrooms after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. At the time of this study, no evaluation of the success of the SSNK curriculum had been attempted, and teacher perspectives regarding SSNK were unknown.

Problem Statement

The problem that was addressed through this study is that the role of play-based learning in the study state's new kindergarten (SSNK) curriculum to teach benchmark standards has not been evaluated. Learning in the United States has shifted with the implementation of CCSS from play-based learning to standards-based curricula (Zosh et al., 2022). With the focus on standards-based curricula, play-based learning in U.S. kindergartens has declined or ceased across the country (Brown, 2024); however, the extent to which teachers incorporate play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms remains unclear (Wohlwend, 2023). Danniels and Pyle (2023) suggested that further research should be conducted regarding kindergarten teachers' perspectives of play-based

practices within curricular areas. Even in the study state, which created a play-based curriculum for kindergarten teachers to use and made it freely available to teachers, the perspectives of teachers were not understood because the state had not followed up to see if and how these teachers were implementing the play-based learning practices presented in the SSNK training. Pyle et al. (2020) suggested that young children learn best through various play-based activities. Through multiple types of play-based learning practices in the classroom, students make gains in their foundational knowledge and social and emotional development in developmentally appropriate ways (Zosh et al., 2022). Brown et al. (2022) have also suggested that play-based learning is more beneficial for kindergarten students' foundational literacy, language, and social skills than direct academic instruction.

At the time of this study, no one had followed up with the teachers in the study state to determine if and how they were implementing SSNK or what additional supports or training kindergarten teachers might need. This situation represented a meaningful gap in practice. Coles et al. (2023) highlighted that when there is a change in curriculum, after the initial professional development occurs, educators should be offered ongoing support through both digital and in-person check-ins, where they can ask follow up questions or ask for additional support. Additionally, teachers should be sent a form immediately after the training to self-evaluate the information they received on the curriculum and share what they learned, as well as any further support they may need. According to a key administrator in the study state, at the time of this study no follow up of this sort had been provided to SSNK training participants, no evaluation of SSNK curriculum

implementation had been attempted, and kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the SSNK curriculum were.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum.

Research Questions

The following two research questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: What are current and former kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the learning standards after being trained in the SSNK curriculum?

RQ2: What additional support and training do current and former kindergarten teachers believe they need to implement a play-based curriculum effectively?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) zones of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) postulated that play is not a random action undertaken by children, but rather a purposeful way to enhance their cognitive function by using imagination and pretend play to form an understanding of concepts and ideas in the world they have not experienced firsthand. During play, children practice language acquisition and learn to move from external visual features to base their knowledge on internal cognitive thinking that goes beyond what they can see and hear (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD refers to the area of learning development that occurs beyond what a child can accomplish independently but within the range that can be learned with the support of an adult or peer. Children need to be supported in learning beyond what they can do independently, to acquire new concepts, and further their cognitive development. ZPD relates to play-based learning because, within the structure of play-based learning, children learn through play with the support of adults, acquiring specific information that they cannot learn independently (Veraksa et al., 2021). Play-based learning enables children to test their skills beyond their current developmental level by enacting their imitation and imagination skills to make sense of the new concepts presented by their teacher and peers in play-based learning settings. More detailed information will be provided in Chapter 2

Across the spectrum of play-based learning, free play is always within a student's ZPD as it is always play directed by the student and allows for pretend play and exploration to make meaning of the world (Clerc-Georgy & Martin, 2021). Guided play and board games are teacher-directed activities that bring a student into their ZPD using adult scaffolding to bridge the gap between what the student knows and what the teacher wants them to learn (Skene et al., 2022). Vygotsky's ZPD in relation to the spectrum of play-based learning was used to shape interview questions and address the study's research agenda. A more detailed description of this conceptual framework is presented in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The research design employed a basic qualitative study, utilizing interviews to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the role of play-based learning and the implementation of play-based learning practices following training in the SSNK curriculum. Tisdell et al. (2025) highlighted that the reason for conducting a basic qualitative study is to understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences. A basic qualitative study was appropriate as I sought to understand kindergarten teachers' perspectives on play-based learning. The phenomenon of interest in this study was kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the role of play-based learning practice after being trained in the SSNK curriculum.

One-on-one, semistructured interviews were conducted with current kindergarten teachers working throughout the study state. To be selected to participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) be a kindergarten teacher trained in the SSNK curriculum, (b) have at least 2 years of experience in the classroom, and (c) teach in a classroom that follows the state learning benchmarks. Interviews were used to collect data, allowing kindergarten teachers to openly discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to their perspectives on play-based learning following training in the SSNK curriculum. I followed an interview protocol with open-ended questions to guide the interview flow, which allowed for flexibility and deep thought to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives (see Wellington, 2015). All participants were interviewed via Zoom. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission. The automatic transcription feature was used through Zoom. Once each

interview was complete, I printed the transcript and listened to the recording again to ensure the accuracy of the automatic transcription. After all data were collected, thematic data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase process for thematic analysis.

Definitions

Academic learning: Focuses on learning in a classroom setting with structured, teacher-led instruction with clear and measurable learning goals around predetermined academic skills (Brown et al., 2022).

Common Core State Standards (CCSS): Precise English language arts and math standards that outline what should be learned from kindergarten to 12th grade. The goal was to ensure all students were prepared for life after high school regardless of where they graduated (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Developmentally appropriate practices: Methods of teaching in early childhood education that build off each child's strengths, integrated with play-based learning approaches to help each child reach their full potential (Danniels & Pyle, 2023).

Direct instruction: Structured, teacher-led learning. New learning is explicitly presented within the confines of predetermined learning goals. Students have little input on what and how they learn (Brown et al., 2022).

Early childhood education: The period of learning that takes place from birth to third grade (Danniels & Pyle, 2023).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Signed into law in 2015, ESSA enables states to develop rigorous standards and teach and assess them in a manner that considers the diverse learning needs of all students (ESSA, 2015).

Foundational skills: Basic literacy, math, and social/emotional skills children need to learn during early childhood to be successful later in life (Zosh et al., 2022).

Free play: Play in which children are driven by their own interests and desires. They are not constrained by predetermined rules or adult directions (Zosh et al., 2022).

Guided play: A type of play where adults support children during play. Guided play is child-driven but structured by adults to support a specific learning goal (Zosh et al., 2022).

Play-based learning: A pedagogical approach in which play serves as the central means for children to grow and learn. Play-based learning encompasses a wide range of play types that exist along the play spectrum (Zosh et al., 2022).

Assumptions

In this study, my first assumption was that all individuals I interviewed would be open and honest in their responses and accurately describe their experiences. Another assumption I made was that kindergarten teachers completed the SSNK training with fidelity. Ravitch and Carl (2016) highlighted that trusting the information given by research participants is essential to a study, as that constitutes the raw data, and there is no way to check for truthfulness.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompassed kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning and the implementation of play-based learning practices after training in the SSNK curriculum. This focus was chosen because, at the time of this study, no evaluation of the SSNK curriculum implementation had been conducted in the study state, so teacher perspectives were unknown. This study was delimited to include 8 public school kindergarten teachers who worked in the study state and who had been trained in the SSNK program. Additional criteria included that participants had at least 2 years of experience as a kindergarten classroom teacher and taught in a public school. I excluded teachers of other grades, non-classroom teachers, teachers with less than 2 years of kindergarten experience, kindergarten teachers in other states, and teachers who are not on record as having completed the SSNK curriculum training. Also excluded were kindergarten teachers in therapeutic settings and those who taught in private kindergartens or preschools. These delimitations may affect transferability. In this paper, I provide a detailed and thorough description of the study's context, background, participants, data, and findings, and offer sufficient shared experience to enable the study's transferability in similar settings (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Readers can use this information to decide whether the study is transferable to their contexts (see Tisdell et al., 2025).

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the transferability of the findings to other research locations (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). This research study took place in one

state in the eastern United States. These results are based on kindergarten teachers in this state and may not be representative of kindergarten teachers nationally. The setting of this study was noted so that those reading the study can determine transferability. As a kindergarten teacher in the study state, my personal biases also needed to be taken into account. I was not trained in the SSNK curriculum myself, nor did I implement it in my classroom, so that did not factor into my own biases. I used member checking so that those I interviewed could review the results of the findings to ensure they accurately reflected their thoughts and feelings (Tisdell et al., 2025).

Significance

This study may be significant because it may increase awareness of teachers' perspectives of play following SSNK training, considering the academic demands of kindergarten. This study may also help local, state, and national educational institutions that are looking to incorporate play-based learning practices into their curriculum designs by providing them with a deeper understanding of what does and does not work for teachers, as well as what further training and support should be included for teachers after the initial training. This study may also inspire positive social change by utilizing teachers' perspectives on play-based learning to contribute to kindergarten students' school success.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I provided background information and evidence of the problem addressed in this study, which is that kindergarten teachers' perspectives on play-based learning practices were unknown in teaching the state learning benchmarks after training

in the SSNK curriculum. Additionally, I discussed the conceptual framework of this study related to Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and the rationale for using a basic qualitative design with one-on-one semistructured interviews. I outlined the criteria for participant selection, including training in the SSNK curriculum program and being a kindergarten teacher working in the study state with at least 2 years of teaching experience. I discussed using semistructured interviews to collect data. Additionally, I listed important definitions, assumptions, and limitations of the study and described the study's scope and delimitations. Lastly, I discussed the significance of the study and the potential for positive social change. In Chapter 2, I present the current and relevant peer-reviewed literature on play-based learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in the current study was that the role of play-based learning in the study state's new kindergarten (SSNK) curriculum to teach benchmark standards has not been evaluated. Even in the study state, which created a play-based curriculum for kindergarten teachers to use and made it freely available to teachers, the perspectives of teachers were not understood because the state had not followed up to see if or how these teachers were implementing the play-based learning practices presented in the SSNK training. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum. In recent years, the amount of play in kindergarten classrooms has been replaced by increased academic rigor and a push for higher academic performance (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Despite the push for more academic rigor in kindergarten, play-based learning has been found to be more beneficial for kindergarteners' foundational literacy, language, and social skills than direct academic instruction (Pyle, Danniels, et al., 2022). Lane et al. (2025) suggested that play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate approach to teaching foundational skills in kindergarten, as it is active, engaging, and meaningful, leading to long-term academic proficiency that continues beyond kindergarten.

In Chapter 2, I describe my literature search strategies for this literature review. I also discuss my conceptual framework based on Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of historically significant and recent research on play-based learning, providing a foundation for this study, both within the United States and

internationally. Finally, I discuss the SSNK curriculum and its significance in the context of play-based learning.

Literature Search Strategy

A thorough and professional literature search was conducted to support this basic qualitative study. I searched several databases using the Walden University Library to find recent scholarly articles related to play-based learning. The databases included Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, NCES Publications, and ProQuest. I also used Google Scholar and accessed the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to find additional literature relevant to the study. The websites of the Department of Education in the study state were used to find educational information on the state where the study occurred. Once I used these databases, I uploaded all articles into Semantic Scholar and Research Rabbitt, which search for similar scholarly articles related to the articles a researcher has already found to ensure they have reached saturation. I used the Boolean/Phrase search mode to target full-length peer-reviewed articles throughout the literary search. Additional constraints for the articles were that they must be (a) published in English, (b) peer-reviewed, (c) full-text, and (d) published between 2020 and 2025. I only included studies that were peer-reviewed and available in full text. Articles published before 2020 were used to provide historical information or as part of the conceptual framework. I used the following search terms to find research articles relevant to this study: history of play and kindergarten, kindergarten teachers' beliefs or views or attitudes on play-based learning in the classroom, learning through play in kindergarten or primary grades or early-childhood

classrooms, loss of play in kindergarten or early childhood or primary grades, play and kindergarten or early childhood or primary grades, play-based learning and kindergarten or early childhood or primary grades, play-based learning and Common Core, play-based learning and standards-based curriculum, play-based learning in the United States, play-based learning theory, teachers' or educators' perceptions of play, teachers' or educators struggles or concerns on play in the classroom, teachers' or educators' perceptions or attitudes of play-based learning.

Conceptual Framework

The phenomenon of interest in the current study was the perspectives of kindergarten teachers on the role of play-based learning practices in teaching state learning standards after they had been trained in the SSNK curriculum. The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD. Vygotsky postulated that play is not a random action done by children but rather a purposeful way for children to increase their cognitive function by using imagination and pretend play to form an understanding of concepts and ideas in the world they have not experienced on their own. Play can be used to introduce new educational concepts. Furthermore, guided play, along with object substitution within ZPD can lead to more literal and figurative thought processes with scaffolding provided by a teacher (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). During play-based learning, children practice language acquisition and learn to move from external visual features to base their knowledge on internal cognitive thinking that goes beyond what they can see and hear (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD is the area of learning development that takes place beyond what a child can accomplish independently but

within the range that can be learned with adult or peer support. Children need to be supported to learn beyond what they can do independently, to learn new concepts, and further their cognitive development (Veraksa et al., 2022).

Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD framework has been applied in many previous research studies. Zosh et al. (2018) used ZPD as a cornerstone on which to expand their play-based learning research, as they developed a play-as-a-spectrum framework. Taylor and Boyer (2020) cited ZPD as a framework for play-based learning in their research because ZPD highlights the importance of play as part of the learning process, while also acknowledging that continued learning occurs through scaffolding from adults, which directly aligns with the play-based learning model. Wood (2025) referenced ZPD in guided play-based learning models for primary-grade science exploration, where children were given freedom to explore, but science concepts were scaffolded by adults. Edwards (2017) highlighted a change in thinking about play-based learning when applying the concepts of ZPD to the research study in that play and teaching did not have to be separate. Play is how children learn and with teacher scaffolding, children can learn anything new from play-based learning situations.

The key concept under this study was kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the state's learning benchmark after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. ZPD is linked to teachers' play-based learning practices and students' retention of new skills by connecting cognitive development with teacher scaffolding during play (Veraksa et al., 2022). ZPD relates to play-based learning because, within its structure, children learn through play with the support of adults to

learn information they cannot grasp independently (Veraksa et al., 2021). Play-based learning enables children to test their skills beyond their current developmental level by enacting their imitation and imagination skills to make sense of the new concepts their teacher presents in play-based learning settings (Vygotsky, 1978). I used Vygotsky's ZPD framework as the basis for this current study, using it to inform my research questions and develop participant interview questions.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

This section provides a review of the literature on the causes leading to the loss of play in kindergarten classrooms, as well as an overview of the literature on the movement toward standards-based kindergarten in the United States and worldwide. This literature review contains a discussion of the role of play in early childhood development and the spectrum in which play and learning exist. Additionally, in this section I review teachers' perspectives of play-based learning in the United States and worldwide and the challenges and barriers faced when implementing play-based learning. This section ends with a description of the SSNK curriculum and the history of its development, implementation, and evaluation.

Loss of Play in Kindergarten

The early 2010s marked a shift in early childhood education worldwide. Increased pressure for academic growth led to the introduction of standards-based teaching with CCSS in the United States (Zosh et al., 2022) and the Early Years Foundation Stage in England (Fisher, 2021). These educational reforms increased academic demands and

standardized testing, leaving teachers with less time to allocate for play (Nesbitt et al., 2023).

Kindergarten classrooms transitioned to more structured and formal learning environments, utilizing prescribed curricula and materials (Parviainen et al., 2024). Although teachers advocated for play as a developmentally appropriate learning strategy in early childhood education, policymakers, administrators, and parents prioritized direct instruction to enhance academic performance, leading to a reduction in playtime (Schlesinger et al., 2020). Teachers were encouraged to teach with intention and use explicitly designed teacher-led instruction to better meet the mandated targets (Fisher, 2021). Because play was perceived as separate from formal education, teachers felt obligated to prioritize teacher-led instruction to meet educational standards, resulting in a decrease in time allocated for play centers, free play, and dramatic play (Wohlwend, 2023). Due to the implementation of standards-based curriculum and high-stakes testing, academic skills such as early decoding skills, vocabulary development, emergent reading, phonological awareness, and print awareness were now directly taught within the curriculum. These skills were previously learned through pretend and guided play (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Play in early childhood classrooms has declined or stopped to make time to teach in a standards-based system (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2020). The reduction or elimination of play in the classroom has led to concerns from some teachers and policymakers that children are missing fundamental development skills that can be learned only as a part of play (Schmidtke, 2022).

Standards-Based Kindergarten

Starting in the early 2010s, kindergarten shifted from play-centered learning to teacher-directed, standards-based learning driven by pressure from state and federal government agencies to later increase student performance on standardized tests (Schmidtke, 2022). These academic standards focused on literacy, social studies, science, and mathematics skills needed for future academic success (DeLuca, Pyle, Valiquette et al., 2020). The increase in academic rigor brought about by implementing a standards-based curriculum has shifted academic urgency, turning kindergarten into the "new first grade" (Brown et al., 2020, p. 1). Formal academic instruction, which was once initiated no earlier than first grade, is now starting in kindergarten to prepare students to meet the increased demands of academic benchmarks and standardized assessments (Wohlwend, 2023).

Lane et al. (2025) suggested a direct correlation between learning foundational literacy skills, such as phonemic and phonological awareness, and long-term reading success. Similarly, Celikdemir et al. (2024) reported a connection between the development of early mathematics skills, including counting, recognizing numbers, and basic addition and subtraction, and long-term mathematics success. Standards-based curricula have narrowed the focus of kindergarten learning to emphasize academic goals that target the mastery of foundational skills, thereby optimizing long-term learning success (Pyle et al., 2024). Fyffe et al. (2022) found that students who displayed lower foundational skills at the start of kindergarten benefited more from the structured, teacher-led, standards-based curriculum than from play-based learning. Once those basic

foundational skills were taught, students became more engaged and motivated in play-based learning settings, exhibiting continued growth.

Approaches to learning in kindergarten have been categorized into standards-based learning and play-based learning, with both approaches receiving support from stakeholders across the United States (Brown et al., 2022). Despite the division between the two, research has suggested that integrating play-based learning within a standards-based curriculum creates an engaging, enjoyable, and meaningful learning experience, as well as a learning environment that meets the needs of all learners (Chen et al., 2023). Play-based learning requires teachers to be thoughtful and intentional in integrating standards into play (Parker et al., 2022). Fleer (2023) described an example of integrating early counting standards within imaginative play after introducing a play-based curriculum into an early childhood classroom. During Fleer's classroom observation, the teacher created a spaceship center where the students pretended to be astronauts. They took turns counting the number of rocket boosters they would need before launching and flying into space. Fleer noted that the students were highly engaged and demonstrated their understanding of mathematical concepts, including counting, addition, and subtraction, as they acted out and drew their space adventures. The use of imaginative space play is an example of how mathematics standards can be integrated into play in an engaging and developmentally appropriate way. Standards-based initiatives, such as CCSS and ESSA, focus on academic standards for learning, but not on the pedagogical standards that address developmentally appropriate practices, including play, which lead to long-term understanding and retention of learning (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2020).

Spectrum of Play-Based Learning

Zosh et al. (2022) argued that play can be seen as a spectrum including child-initiated, child-directed free play; adult-initiated, child-directed guided play; and adult-initiated, child-directed games. Children learn in all areas of the spectrum (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2021). Play-based learning combines the engagement and motivation of play with the cognitive development of academic skills, promoting long-term retention of learning (Wohlwend, 2023).

Child-Initiated, Child-Directed Free Play

Zosh et al. (2022) stated that children are intrinsically motivated to engage in free play, and this type of play allows for imagination and exploration based on their interests. In free play, there is no explicit learning goal in mind, and children can engage in learning at their own pace (Wang et al., 2024). Free play supports social and emotional development, allowing children to understand social rules and develop self-regulation skills (Donner et al., 2023). During free play children are also practicing cognitive skills such as oral language, literacy, mathematics, and scientific inquiry (Martín-García & Rico-González, 2023). Free play creates an enjoyable and low-stress environment for children to explore and make sense of the world around them (Louw & Claassens, 2024). Zeng and Ng (2024) found that free play also allows children to explore scientific concepts through loose parts play, in which children use whatever is at hand, such as blocks, containers, water, sand, chalk, and wood, to conduct experiments with the materials, such as finding out how much space is needed for a toy to fall between two pieces of wood. In child-initiated, child-directed free play, children explore and interact

with materials and with one another without any prompting from adults. The desire to learn is integrated within free play.

Adult-Initiated, Child-Directed Guided Play

Adult-initiated, child-directed guided play allows children to explore and make sense of their own learning with adults scaffolding when needed. Guided play has an explicated learning goal in mind (Zosh et al., 2022). Adult scaffolding enables children to operate within their ZPD, where they can also be supported in exploring beyond their current knowledge, thanks to the guidance of an adult (Veraksa et al., 2022). Guided play enables children to develop problem-solving skills and supports cognitive and academic development as they explore and question their own learning (Skene et al., 2022). Children in play-based mathematics classes, where teachers employed guided play practices, achieved significantly higher learning outcomes in mathematics compared to those in traditional mathematics classes (Wickstrom & Pyle, 2024). Similarly, Allee-Herndon et al. (2021) found that guided play-based literacy groups in kindergarten led to more significant gains in reading than traditional literacy groups. Pyle et al. (2024) provided an example of guided play with a literacy focus in their research on a teacher creating a pizza store for students to use. The teacher incorporated oral language skills by having students pretend to be customers ordering and workers taking orders. They also incorporated writing by including notepads, allowing students to write down customer orders and bills.

Through purposeful planning and structuring of various play situations, teachers can target specific academic skills students need (Schlesinger et al., 2020). Guided play

allows teachers to purposefully structure students' play to focus on specific learning standards while keeping the engagement play provides (Zosh et al., 2022). Additionally, guided play allows teachers to scaffold concepts within a standards-based curriculum so students can understand them within their ZPD (Wullschleger et al., 2022).

Adult-Initiated, Child-Directed Games

Using board games allows teachers in early childhood classrooms to incorporate play-based learning within literacy and mathematics standards. O'Neill and Holmes (2022) utilized board games for academic learning in early childhood settings, noting that board games expose children to new vocabulary and enable them to practice language skills with peers and adults. Board games can also incorporate early literacy skills such as letter recognition, word recognition, and word formation (Cès et al., 2025). Celikdemir et al. (2024), in a study of the use of games to support the development of mathematics skills of 54 children between the ages of 60 months and 72 months, found that children in the mathematics game group scored better on a posttest compared to the children who continued to learn mathematics in the traditional classroom. They also observed that playing mathematics games was fun and engaging and allowed children to help and learn mathematics skills from one another through open discussions.

Ongoing Assessment and Play-Based Learning

Chen et al. (2023) noted that ongoing assessment, both formative and summative, is a key feature of standards-based systems. Assessments designed within a standards-based system focus on collecting evidence to support student achievement of specific academic skills (Im, 2021). These assessments are typically aligned with specific targeted

lessons within a curriculum, which does not align with the open learning model of play-based learning. Consequently, the mandated use of these assessments serves as another deterrent for teachers to implement play-based learning practices (Pyle, DeLuca, et al., 2022). Taylor and Boyer (2020) discussed how ongoing assessments are developmentally appropriate ways to track students' academic gains and areas of continued support within a play-based system. However, they noted that assessments in a play-based system differ from those in a standards-based system. Additionally, Taylor and Boyer (2020) emphasized that in a play-based system, the type of play and its purpose and learning needs must be determined before selecting the assessment type.

Although current standards-based assessment systems are misaligned with play-based learning (Pyle, DeLuca et al., 2022), there are examples of effective ongoing academic assessments within a play-based model. DeLuca, Pyle, Braund et al. (2020) observed that teachers could use data collected during assessments to develop play activities that targeted specific skill deficits revealed by students during assessments or independent work. DeLuca, Pyle, Braund et al. (2020) reported an example of a teacher who noticed some students struggling with certain skills on their phonics assessments and then purposefully incorporated those skills into a play center with puzzles and letter games to focus on those standards. Messenger and Gallagher (2024) noted that in their study a teacher planned an intervention in students' oral language development while watching how students played together in the play area during free play. The teacher was able to observe language standards being met and note which standards needed improvement in future lessons. Observations from play-based activities can be used to

guide future play learning activities but can also be used to inform future direct instruction based on what academic standards the teacher notices students are struggling to learn. Similarly, observations during direct instruction or data from assessments can inform future play-based activities (Chen et al., 2023). Play-based learning and standards-based learning practices, including ongoing assessments, can work together with thoughtful and intentional integration (Parker et al., 2022).

Teachers' Perspectives of Play in the United States

Wickstrom and Pyle (2023) have demonstrated in their research that teachers in the United States consider play a developmentally appropriate means of learning in early childhood settings. Yet teachers have a limited understanding of how play leads to learning and the various types of play that can be incorporated into the classroom to support their teaching standards (Fox et al., 2023). In their interview with seven pre-service kindergarten teachers, Rodriguez-Meehan (2021) found that what the teachers identified as play-based learning was, in fact, teacher-directed activities.

Pyle et al. (2020) found that teachers in the United States were divided between two ideologies regarding the role of play in learning. The first ideology is based on the idea that play is meant to be unstructured free time for children to explore and to be themselves. While students might improve their social skills, no teacher-planned academic learning should happen. Teachers who hold this view believe that structuring play reduces the enjoyment and creativity that naturally occur during play (Brown et al., 2022). The second ideology is based on the idea that play can be utilized in various ways, ranging from free play to guided play, allowing students to develop both social and

academic skills. Teachers who subscribe to this view believe that play and teacher-planned academic learning can coexist if teachers' structure play purposefully and provide scaffolding during playtime. In their study, Pyle et al. (2020) found a direct correlation between a teacher's ideology and their beliefs on play and learning, based on whether they worked within a school and community that supported and encouraged the use of play in learning.

Zosh et al. (2022) found that for teachers to implement play-based learning practices, such as guided play, successfully, they needed to have a comprehensive understanding of child development, play-based learning practices, and curriculum goals. For these criteria to be met, teachers required high-quality, continuous professional development and ongoing support customized to their specific needs (Cheung et al., 2022). In their study of 30 kindergarten teachers already using a play-based mandated curriculum, Nesbitt et al. (2025) found that when kindergarten teachers who were given a 2-day refresher workshop on the play-based learning curriculum were then followed up with over the next 6 months with individualized coaching sessions, classroom visits, and peer focus groups around the implementation of the play-based learning curriculum, nearly all teachers reported they felt more successful with the curriculum than they did before the professional development and ongoing support. Teachers in the United States have cited a lack of funding for professional development and resources for creating play environments in their classrooms as a significant barrier to implementing play-based learning (Parker et al., 2022).

With the shift to standards-based initiatives, teachers in the United States have felt increased pressure to devote academic time to structured curricula and teacher-directed learning (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2021). With the introduction of standards-based policies in the United States, teacher accountability measures have been implemented to ensure that teachers adequately prepare students for academic assessments. The pressure to show student growth and effectiveness as a teacher is seen as a barrier to play-based practices (Wohlwend, 2023). Brown (2024) highlighted the fact that the push for high-stakes testing and a structured curriculum in kindergarten classrooms has shifted instruction away from authentic learning through discovery and play toward teacher-directed instruction focused on what students need to know to pass future tests. Play has become a reward for accepting teacher-directed instruction and is no longer a valued part of the learning process.

Teachers' Perspectives of Play Globally

The shift to academically focused kindergartens is not unique to the United States, nor is the belief that play is developmentally appropriate for learning (Dean & Wenner, 2025). The debate between the use of standards-based or play-based curricula is prevalent in many countries. In a meta-analysis of 1475 studies on play-based learning worldwide, Dean and Wenner (2025) found that teachers in Nordic countries had the most autonomy to integrate play-based learning within the curriculum, whereas teachers in countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East had far stricter emphases on achievement and test scores, pushing teachers to adhere to traditional teaching methods and leaving play as a separate activity.

In a study comparing play-based learning practices in one English and one Welsh classroom, Goodhall and Atkinson (2021) found that while both classroom teachers believed in the value of play-based learning, the extent to which they were allowed to incorporate play within their classrooms was limited due to the educational mandates of the country. England has more stringent curriculum mandates, while Wales has granted greater autonomy to teachers. Goodhall and Atkinson noted that the English teacher felt pressured to limit access to play due to curriculum constraints and believed that students struggled to stay engaged and motivated in their learning. Dissimilarly, the Welsh teacher felt supported to encourage playful exploration and play across the spectrum and felt students were engaged and motivated and took charge of their learning.

In Sweden, Samuelsson and Björklund (2022) found that kindergarten classrooms exhibit primarily play-based approaches. Teachers expressed concerns, though, about the need to shift their role perspective from being the primary driver of learning to being facilitators in child-led, play-based classrooms. In a survey of over 500 early childhood teachers in England, Fisher (2021) found that teachers believed play-based learning was developmentally appropriate but struggled with the demands of rigorous mathematics and literacy standards, as well as how to purposefully incorporate play into these standards while still helping students achieve academic gains.

In a study of Canadian kindergarten teachers, Danniels and Pyle (2023) reported that while the teachers valued play in their classrooms, they needed guidance on balancing play-based learning with high academic demands. The lack of understanding

and support for incorporating play-based learning within a standards-based curriculum led these teachers to keep play and learning separate.

Chen et al. (2023) reported that educational policy reform in Australia has shifted the focus of early childhood education from the intentional teaching of learning outcomes through direct instruction back to intentional teaching through play-based learning practices. In their study of 34 kindergarten teachers, all teachers agreed that play is developmentally appropriate for learning; however, they struggled to understand how adults can support guided play without disrupting a child's natural learning experience. Leggett (2023) also noted that Australian teachers struggled to understand how to support academic learning during play and their role during play-based learning. These teachers also acknowledged that they found it difficult to incorporate meaningful and authentic play-based learning due to the constraints of ongoing assessments that need to be conducted (Leggett, 2023).

Yin et al. (2021) surveyed 542 kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong and found that teachers were uncertain about when to intervene in play-based learning and their role in play. These teachers also felt they needed more materials, resources, and space to implement the spectrum of play they were required to use (Yin et al., 2021). Similarly, Cheung et al. (2022), in a 3-year study of 90 kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong, found that teachers experienced frustration and misunderstandings in implementing play-based learning. Cheung et al. also reported that teachers felt the lack of professional development contributed to their inability to implement play-based learning into their teaching. Additionally, teachers feared that many parents did not see the learning value of

play and thus felt their children were not receiving the highest quality education. While both globally and in the United States, researchers reported a shift toward play-based learning, the need to satisfy academic demands, achieve benchmark results in high-stakes testing, teach to a standards-based curriculum, and do all this with little professional development support has impeded teachers' confidence and ability to implement play-based learning practices effectively. One effort to support teachers in using play-based learning was undertaken in the SSNK curriculum in one state in the United States, which is the focus of this study.

SSNK Curriculum

SSNK is an open-source kindergarten curriculum that combines the study states' math, science, social studies, and language arts standards with developmentally appropriate practices of play-based learning. The SSNK curriculum was developed in the study state to increase test scores in later grades after noticing that test scores in a neighboring state's district were increasing for children who participated in play-based curricula during their primary education. According to internal reports of the study state, planning for the SSNK curriculum started in 2017, with the study state's education plan developed under the ESSA which provided money to create programs that supported developmentally appropriate learning opportunities to make learning more engaging and developmentally appropriate for young learners. The study state's Department of Education had conducted an in-depth study of a school district in a neighboring state's play-based curriculum after seeing continued success in that city's standardized testing. The state Department of Education then applied for and received a grant from the U.S.

Department of Education and adapted the district's curriculum to fit the needs of the entire state. According to further internal reports, the SSNK curriculum was initially completed at the end of 2018 and training was offered online in early 2019. SSNK was piloted by five school districts in the study state in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. According to state study administrators, there was no follow-up program evaluation. After the pilot study, the training videos and curriculum were made available for free on the study state's education department's website for any teachers to use. There were also some live online trainings in the program, offered free of charge to anyone who would like to participate, starting after the pilot years. The program and teacher training continue to be available on the state's education site. According to internal reports, curriculum and training updates are made available on the study state's education department's Newsroom and Facebook page.

As of the 2024 school year, there were only about 250 teachers trained in the SSNK curriculum, but according to an early learning director, little was known about how or whether these teachers have implemented any of the play-based practices into their classrooms after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. At the time of this study, no evaluation of the success of the SSNK curriculum has been attempted, and teacher perspectives regarding SSNK are unknown.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature relevant to play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, which suggested that various types of play-based learning had lasting positive effects on cognitive, social, and emotional development (Zosh et al.,

2022). With an increased focus on standards-based learning, there is a decrease in play-based learning within the classroom. The literature reviewed for this study supports the teacher perspective that play-based learning is beneficial in the classroom; however, there is also a lack of support and training to implement it effectively within a standards-based system (Pyle, DeLuca, et al., 2022). This study addresses a gap in practice because, at the time of this study, teacher perspectives regarding SSNK were unknown. In Chapter 3, I will provide an overview of my qualitative research design, including my role as the researcher, justification for methodologies used, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum. As of the 2024 school year, there were only about 250 teachers in the target state trained in the SSNK curriculum, but according to an early learning director, little was known about how or whether these teachers had implemented any of the play-based practices into their classrooms after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. In Chapter 3, I provide a rationale for the research design I chose for this study and describe my role as the researcher. I also explain the study's methodology, including instrumentation, participant selection, recruitment, and participation. The data collection and analysis process, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures are also described.

Research Design and Rationale

The following two research questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: What are current and former kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the learning standards after being trained in the SSNK curriculum?

RQ2: What additional support and training do current and former kindergarten teachers believe they need to implement a play-based curriculum effectively?

The central concept I explored in this study was the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms following teacher training in a play-based curriculum. To answer these questions, I conducted a basic qualitative study of

kindergarten teachers in the study state to examine teachers' perspectives on the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the state's learning benchmarks after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. Teachers' perspectives and beliefs about play-based learning were assessed using semistructured interviews. The conceptual framework for this study was based on Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and was used to inform the study. The data collected from the interviews were reviewed and interpreted to gain insights into the use of play-based learning within a standards-based curriculum.

The research design for this study was a basic qualitative study, as basic qualitative studies enable a researcher to understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences (see Tisdell et al., 2025). Many qualitative research approaches, such as case studies and grounded theory, enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of people's experiences. A case study was not chosen for the current study because case studies seek to understand a single bounded case (see Tisdell et al., 2025), which is not the purpose of the current study. The current study focused on teachers' perspectives on play-based learning, not the phenomenon of play-based learning. Grounded theory was not chosen for this study because grounded theory studies are designed to generate new theories based on the data gathered (see Tisdell et al., 2025). I addressed a gap in the literature related to kindergarten teachers' perspectives of play-based practices within curricular areas.

Role of the Researcher

My relationship with the participants was that of a participant-observer, in which I acted purposefully to keep the interview discourse on track (see Holstein & Gubrium,

2020). As an early childhood public school teacher with 14 years of experience, I have come to realize that how children learn through play has become a passion of mine. I am a kindergarten teacher in the study state, but I have not been trained in the SSNK curriculum, nor does the district I work in use the SSNK curriculum. I did not include any teachers in my district or teachers I had previously worked with to minimize conflict of interest and bias. I was not in any supervisory role and had no authority over any participants in this study.

Wellington (2015) argued that a neutral stance in research is impossible because every person has inherent biases. As the researcher, I minimized biases by reflecting on and critically evaluating the research at each stage. I used a research journal to create an audit trail, reflecting on my biases, noting questions and decisions made throughout the study, and analyzing the data (see Tisdell et al., 2025). Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the data and findings. My role as a researcher was to be self-aware of how my beliefs, experiences, and biases as an early childhood educator influenced my interactions with participants during interviews and data analysis (see Collins & Stockton, 2022).

Methodology

The research design for this study was a basic qualitative study. Tisdell et al. (2025) highlighted that the reason for conducting a basic qualitative study is to understand how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences. I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews with current kindergarten teachers throughout the study state. Interviews were used to collect data so kindergarten teachers could openly

discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to their perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the learning benchmarks after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. Once the data were collected, thematic data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase process for thematic analysis.

Participant Selection

Participants in the study were kindergarten teachers located throughout the study state who had been trained in the SSNK curriculum. Prospective participants were found through purposeful sampling because it allowed me to find participants from the group I wished to gather information from who met the criteria of being a public kindergarten teacher in the study state, having at least 2 years of teaching experience, and having been trained in the SSNK curriculum (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I recruited participants for this study via email. Emails for teachers were obtained through online public websites of school districts that were marked as having participated in the SSNK curriculum training on the study states' department of education website or through my personal communication with the early learning director. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to identify further participants. Snowball sampling happens when an initial participant suggests another willing participant (see Wellington, 2015). Emails and a consent form, which included information about the study, were sent to prospective participants. Those who responded to the email were asked to confirm their consent to participate in the study and verify that they met the study's selection criteria.

Hennink and Kaiser (2022) reported that data saturation, achieved through in-depth interviews with homogeneous groups of participants, was reached with as few as

nine participants. The total population for the current study participant pool consisted of approximately 250 kindergarten teachers in the study state who were trained in the SSNK program, representing a homogeneous population. Following the findings of Hennink and Kaiser and given the homogeneity of the research population, the sample size of eight for this study was outside of the data saturation range, which could affect the interpretation of the study results.

Instrumentation

I was the main data collection instrument in this study. I wrote the interview protocol for this study and scheduled interviews with participants. I conducted interviews via Zoom, utilizing the audio recording and transcription features, while taking notes to ensure the accuracy of the data. Finally, I used reflexive journaling throughout the study to minimize subjectivity and biases. The interview protocol enabled me to inform participants of the study's expectations and their rights at the beginning of the interview, ensuring that the data were collected ethically (see Wellington, 2015). The interview protocol enabled me to ask the same questions consistently of each participant and in the same order, thereby increasing the validity of the data gathered from the responses. Researchers use interviews to understand personal experiences and the meaning made from those experiences (see Seidman, 2019). I selected interviews as the method for data collection to understand the perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the learning benchmarks after being trained in the SSNK curriculum.

I conducted a nine-question interview based on the conceptual framework and relevant literature. Question 1 was an opening question to understand the participant's

teaching background and experience. Questions 2 through 6 were designed to align with RQ1 to gain a better understanding of what teachers thought play-based learning was and how they utilized it. Interview Questions 7 and 8 were designed to align with RQ2 to better understand what supports and changes teachers needed to be able to utilize play-based learning in the classroom. Question 9 was the closing question that allowed the participants to share any additional thoughts they had on play-based learning. Clarifying questions were asked throughout the interview to ensure the credibility of the answers. The interview questions are presented in the Appendix.

Content validity of the instrumentation was established through peer review. The validity of the interview questions was confirmed by an elementary school guidance counselor with over 30 years of experience who holds a doctorate in education. With her experience in writing a dissertation that used semistructured interview questions as her instrumentation and her extensive knowledge of play-based learning practices, she was an appropriate person to offer knowledgeable suggestions to minimize biases and assumptions that might have existed in the interview questions. This person said that, of the interview questions, questions 7 and 8 were potentially leading the participants to answer in a certain way, so it was suggested to change the wording of both to make them yes or no questions, with follow-up questions to fit the response of the participant, to avoid influencing the initial response. I followed this advice and adjusted the wording of these questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I applied to Walden's Internal Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct this study, and then I began the recruitment process by contacting the eight kindergarten teachers who were listed as having participated in SSNK training on the study state's Department of Education website to ask if they were willing to participate in this study. I used the publicly available staff email list on each district's website to obtain email addresses for each teacher and sent them an email message presented with the consent form attached. I then used these eight teachers to continue snowball sampling, aiming to reach a purposeful sample of 12 teachers for this study, although I was only able to obtain eight. Teachers who wished to proceed with the interview responded to the email and consent form with the words, "I consent." After I received consent, I followed up to schedule the interview via Zoom. The interviews were between 20 and 40 minutes. All interviews took place after the teacher's contracted work hours on a day and time that worked best for the participant. I conducted the Zoom interviews in a private room, with the door closed, to ensure privacy. I encouraged those interviewed to choose a quiet location with good internet access, where they felt comfortable and unlikely to be interrupted.

Data were collected through transcribed audio recordings and a research journal. I used the journal to take notes, critically reflect on what happened during the interview, and record my thoughts and feelings to minimize bias (see Wellington, 2015). I also used an audit trail throughout the research process. I kept thorough notes on how and why decisions were made and explained how the data were collected and interpreted to ensure

the trustworthiness of the research process. At the beginning of the interview, participants were told that all data collected would be kept confidential. They were also reminded that they could opt out of the interview at any time and for any reason. Participants were informed that confidentiality would be maintained by using alphanumeric pseudonyms, such as P1, P2, and so on. At the end of the interviews, each participant was sent the edited transcript of their interview, allowing them to review it for accuracy as part of the member checking process. They were reminded to contact me at any time with questions or concerns.

Data Analysis Plan

I used the six-phase process by Braun and Clarke (2021) for thematic analysis to analyze the data. The data were analyzed for patterns that were coded to develop themes. The first phase of thematic analysis was to familiarize myself with the data. I immersed myself in the data by reading the transcripts of the interviews several times. I used the transcription feature on Zoom while interviewing participants so I could access the transcript immediately after each interview. I then checked the transcript against the recording to ensure the transcription accurately matched what was said. I also listened to the recordings of the interviews again and took notes to discover initial patterns in the data (see Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Once I had familiarized myself with the data, I started the second phase of thematic analysis (initial coding), where I looked for terms and phrases aligned with the RQs (see Saldana, 2021). I used Dedoose software to upload the data and then used the highlighting feature to highlight similar words and phrases across the interviews. I

grouped the data based on similar codes and looked for connections between the data and coding groups. Looking at the connections allowed me to put the codes into categories. With the data divided into established categories, I could then move into Braun and Clarke's (2021) third phase of thematic analysis: generating initial themes. Initial themes were developed by looking at the data, RQs, and the categories established during initial coding (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). Once the initial themes were developed, I moved into Phase 4 and reviewed the themes for accuracy. Once the themes had been reviewed for accuracy, I defined and labeled the themes before continuing to Phase 6, where I wrote up my findings and connections to the RQs and supporting literature (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reporting discrepant cases as part of the data analysis increases confidence in the principal explanation of a study by providing perspectives that do not support a study (Tisdell et al., 2025). There were no discrepant cases to report as part of my data analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be determined by the study's rigor, which involves paying attention to the study's conceptualization and the process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and presenting the data (Tisdell et al., 2025). For qualitative research to be trustworthy, the researcher must demonstrate that the study is both valid and reliable by conducting it ethically and presenting evidence that the research accurately represents the reality of the individuals being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). There are four criteria for analyzing the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is determined by the researcher accurately representing the participants' thoughts and feelings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Credibility for the current study was accomplished through a reflexive journal, member checks, and content validity. Reflexive journaling happened continuously throughout the study to monitor my subjectivity and biases. A trial interview was conducted before the research interviews with participants. I used a colleague at my school to test the interview questions. Testing the questions with a colleague allowed me to ensure they understood each question and enabled me to gather feedback on any changes that needed to be made before I completed the interviews with the final study participants (see Lambert, 2012). Member checks occurred after each transcript. Participants could clarify or correct any errors in how their information was recorded. Content validity of the instrumentation was established through peer review. The validity of the interview questions was confirmed by an elementary school guidance counselor with over 30 years of experience who holds a doctorate in education.

Transferability

Transferability is the study's ability to be transferred to similar settings with similar results (Tisdell et al., 2025). A thick description of the study's context, background, participants, data, and findings provides enough shared experience to allow the study to be transferable to other settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). In the current study, I used thick descriptions of the setting of the interviews, how the data were collected, who the participants represent, and the participants' experiences so readers can

make meaning within the context of the study. Readers can use their meaning to decide the transferability of the study.

Dependability

Dependability is the ability of the researcher to make sure the research is well-documented, logical, and traceable. The reader should be able to track how and in what way the data were collected and interpreted. The data should be stable over time (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Dependability for the current study was accomplished through an audit trail and member checks. An audit trail took place throughout the research process. I used a journal to keep thorough notes and explain how the data were collected. I also used transcripts of the interviews. Member checks occurred after the final analysis of the data. Participants were invited to review their own transcripts for accuracy. Only my committee members and I had access to the raw data. It was not shared with anyone else. These strategies support the dependability of my study.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the study's findings were derived from the data collected. The researcher must also acknowledge and address their biases and prejudices reflexively and reflectively (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I used a research journal to reflect critically on my biases and assumptions throughout the study. I also used an audit trail throughout the research process. I kept thorough notes on how and why decisions were made and explained how the data were collected and interpreted. I also used Dedoose software to help with the confirmability of the study. I reviewed the transcripts of the interviews against the audio recordings to

ensure that the transcripts accurately captured the correct responses. My goal was to minimize any biases in the study.

Ethical Procedures

I requested approval to conduct this research study from Walden University's IRB. No research was conducted until approval was received (approval #07-21-25-1040485). The IRB process ensured that my research was conducted in an ethical manner. After receiving IRB approval, I emailed prospective participants an invitation to participate in the research study. This email outlined the purpose of the research study and explained how the data for the study would be collected. Once the teacher agreed to participate, I emailed the participant consent form, which included information on why the participant was selected for the study, the purpose of the study, how their information would be kept safe and confidential, and the expected duration of the interview. The consent form also informed participants that they could withdraw their participation at any time and for any reason.

Protecting the rights and privacy of the participants was one of the most crucial components of conducting ethical research. It was my duty as the researcher to ensure the confidentiality of each participant's information (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Participants' confidentiality was protected using pseudonyms. Participants could review the transcript of their interviews and make any necessary corrections. The participants could verify that the reported data were accurate compared to what they had reported. No questions or concerns were raised during the study. Per Walden IRB policy, the data will be stored in a password-protected digital file for 5 years. After 5 years, the data file will

be permanently wiped from my devices using a tool like Eraser ® and any paper documents will be shredded.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I discussed the research method used for this qualitative study to understand teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the state learning standards after being trained in the SSNK curriculum. A purposeful sample of 8 kindergarten teachers trained in the SSNK curriculum with at least 2 years of experience was used in this study. Data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom, lasting 20–40 minutes each. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. An interview protocol with open-ended questions guided the interviews, allowing for flexibility and in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The study's trustworthiness was based on its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I also discussed ethical considerations regarding participant recruitment, data collection, and the continued storage of my qualitative data. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the setting, data collection, and data analysis methods used in this study. I will describe the study's results as they relate to each RQ and present my findings using the data collected through participant interviews. I will describe my evidence of trustworthiness and summarize the answers to the research questions.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum. The research questions that guided the study were:

RQ1: What are current and former kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the learning standards after being trained in the SSNK curriculum?

RQ2: What additional support and training do current and former kindergarten teachers believe they need to implement a play-based curriculum effectively?

In this chapter, I describe the setting, data collection, and data analysis. I then present the results in relation to the research questions. I conclude this chapter by providing evidence of trustworthiness and a summary.

Setting

There were organizational factors that influenced participants' experiences during the study, which may have affected the interpretation of the study results. While the state supported the SSNK play-based curriculum, six of the participants discussed a shift within their school districts toward scripted curricula, with the time allocated for the SSNK play-based curriculum being cut by half or more. According to participants, the implementation of the play-based curriculum did not always occur with the intended fidelity, as outlined in the SSNK state training. The lack of fidelity in the use of the

SSNK curriculum and the shift in focus to scripted instruction may have led to a lack of interest among prospective participants in volunteering for the study.

Data Collection

Recruitment for this study proved to be a challenge. Recruitment, conducted via email, took place over a 5-month period from July to December 2025. I suspended recruitment after 5 months, despite making multiple attempts to email potential participants, including modifying my recruitment email to offer a $20 Amazon gift card as a thank-you. During the recruitment period, I sent 136 emails to kindergarten teachers across the study state who had been identified as having received training in the SSNK program. I heard back from 13 out of 136 people. Only eight of the 13 met the criteria and followed through with the interview. Two people who emailed me back stated that they were no longer in the teaching profession, so they did not qualify for the study. They mentioned that before leaving the profession, they felt a lot of pressure to raise standardized test scores and reading scores. They stated that more time was being devoted to scripted curricula, and the time allocated for the play-based SSNK curriculum was being reduced from 60 minutes to 30 minutes. Additionally, pressure to achieve test scores leads to a lack of fidelity in using and being trained in this program. These organizational conditions may have influenced my research participants, which in turn affected the interpretation of my study.

Another condition was the timeframe during which the participants were interviewed. Two teachers were interviewed during summer break, when they were not actively teaching classes and using the SSNK curriculum. Additionally, although

recruitment was targeted throughout the study state, participants only represented three school districts across the state, with four participants from one, three from another, and the last from the third.

All the teachers interviewed were European American female teachers. Of the eight teachers interviewed, one had been teaching for more than 20 years, five had been teaching between 15 and 19 years, one had been teaching for 10 years, and one had been teaching for 3 years. At the time of the study, all eight were certified kindergarten teachers in the study state.

I collected interview data from eight kindergarten teachers in the study state over a period of 5 months, from July 2025 to December 2025. All interviews were conducted via Zoom from the privacy of my home or school office. I followed the data collection process described in Chapter 3, with no unusual circumstances noted during the data collection process. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Two people agreed to be interviewed but never responded to any of the emails to schedule a time for the interview. One person started the interview, but was unable to proceed after the demographics portion, as it was determined she was not trained in the SSNK curriculum. Two participants had to reschedule their interviews for later times but were able to complete them at the new dates. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed via Zoom.

Data Analysis

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of thematic analysis as a guide to analyze the data. I familiarized myself with the data, and I downloaded my transcription

files after each Zoom interview. I reviewed the transcription files while listening to the audio recording of the interview to correct any errors and verify the completeness of the interview content. I then reread the transcripts and jotted down notes in the margins, recording some early thoughts and ideas that came to mind.

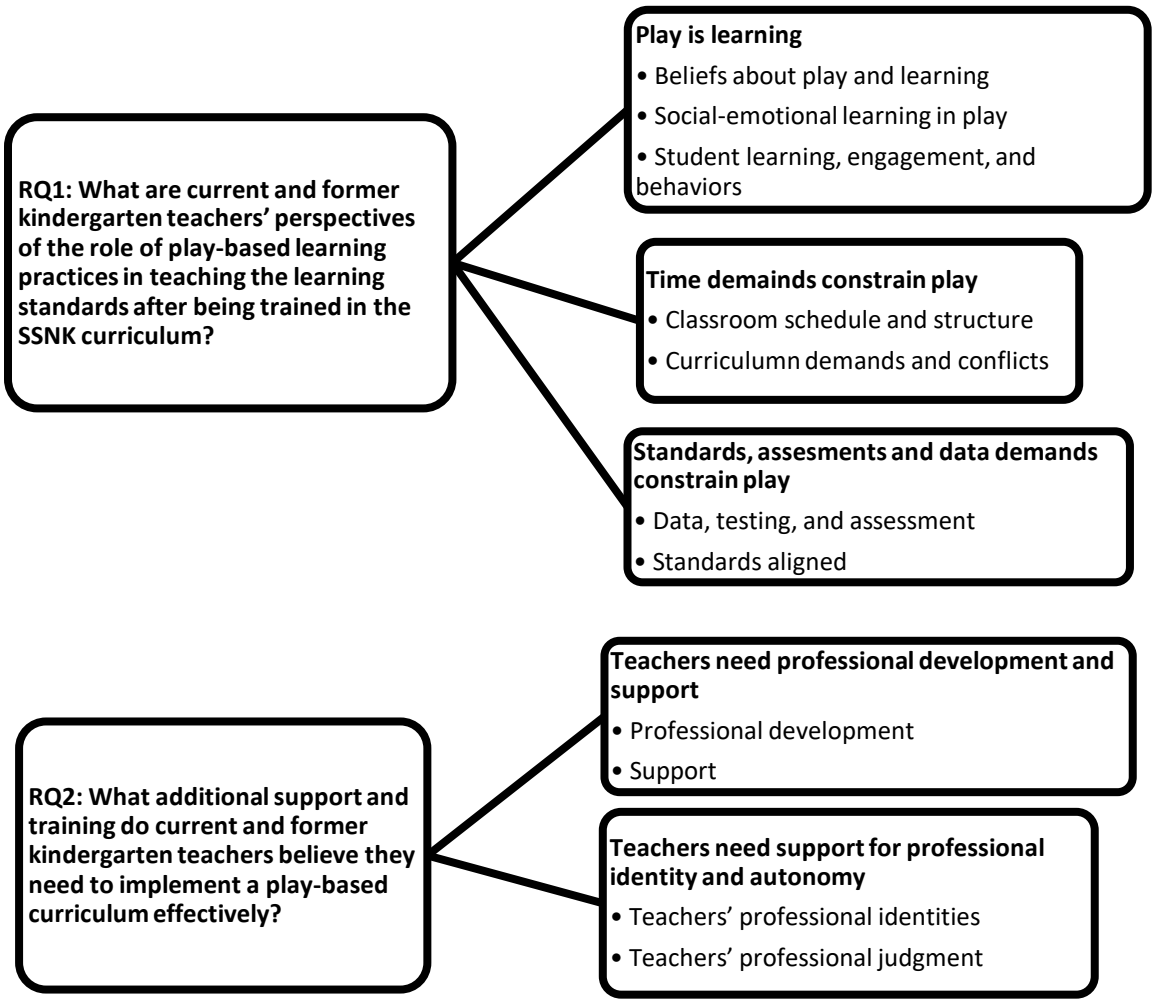
Next, I began initial coding. I uploaded the transcription files into the data analysis application, Dedoose. I used the highlight feature to identify relevant data segments in each transcript and then applied coded labels to those data sets. I generated 166 initial codes. Examples include *play to practice literacy*, *loss of time for SSNK*, and *standardized testing pressures*. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), a researcher should ask themselves if they can obtain a comprehensive view of their data set through their codes alone to determine if they are ready to move on from coding. After reviewing my codes several times, I felt that the 166 codes effectively captured the entire diversity of my data set.

I identified 166 initial codes, utilizing Dedoose to examine the codes for shared meanings and patterns across the data sets. I then clustered the codes into 11 categories that captured the data and addressed the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These categories were as follows: *beliefs about play and learning*; *social-emotional learning in play*; *classroom schedule and structure*; *curriculum demands and conflicts*; *data, testing, and assessment*; *professional development; supports*; *standards aligned*; *teachers' professional identities*; *teachers' professional judgment*; and *student learning, engagement,* and *behaviors*.

I examined the 11 categories against the complete data set to determine if they were the most important themes that highlighted the data as related to the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2021) highlighted that phase 4 is when categories are condensed, changed, or cut because they do not fit the big picture of the data set as it relates to the research questions. After reading through the data sets again and looking at my categories, I condensed them into five themes that encompassed a broader scope: *play is lear*ning; *time constraints on play*; *assessments and data demands*; *support and needs;* and *teacher identity and autonomy.* I applied the theme *play is learning* with the categories *beliefs about play and learning*; *social-emotional learning in play*; and *student learning, engagement, and behaviors* to RQ1. I also applied the theme *time demands constrain play* with the categories *classroom schedule and structure*; and *curriculum demands and conflicts* to RQ1. Lastly, to RQ1, I applied the theme *standards, assessments, and data demands constrain play* with the categories *data, testing, and assessment;* and *standards aligned*. To RQ 2, I applied the theme of *teachers need professional development and* support with the categories *professional development* and *support*. Lastly, I applied the theme *teachers need support for professional identity and autonomy* with the categories *teachers' professional identities* and *teachers' professional judgment to RQ2.* Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between research questions, final themes, and initial themes. All data were relevant to the purpose of the study, and no discrepant cases were found.

Figure 1

Research Questions, Themes, and Categories



Results

In this section, I present the results of the findings related to the two research questions, with evidence from the participants in the form of direct quotes to support the conclusions.

Results for RQ1

RQ 1 asked, "What are current and former kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching the learning standards after being trained in the SSNK curriculum?" The themes of play is learning; time demands constrain play; and standards, assessments, and data demands constrain play emerged in the findings to address this research question.

Play Is Learning

The first theme that emerged from participants as an agreed-upon perspective was that play is a form of learning. Play is not a break from learning or something earned as a reward. Play is how kindergarteners make sense of the world around them, stay engaged with the material, and learn early foundational skills they will need for long-term academic success.

When discussing their play-based learning practices after being trained in the SSNK curriculum, each participant shared their own beliefs about play and concurred that play-based learning is hands-on, engaging, and involves students interacting and learning from one another. P7 said regarding play-based learning and the SSNK curriculum, "It brought the joy back into teaching, and the whole play-based piece was the icing on the top, because kids need to play, and they work, they learn through play. And that's really what this program does." P3 similarly said, "From a personal, philosophical standpoint, I feel like children should have more tactile, hands-on learning opportunities to make sense of their world. Play is very important. I think it's the work of

a child." P1 went on to describe her beliefs about play and learning, as well as what hands-on, play-based learning looked like during SSNK centers. P1 explained:

> They can choose to go the dramatic play area and create a barbershop, and so they'd be making signs. If it was a restaurant, they might be making a menu. With the block center, they might be creating something that goes along with what we're learning, and then maybe making signs. I am trying to encourage them to work on reading and math while they're playing.

P8 also discussed hands-on, play-based learning and what encouragement looks like to prompt children to think beyond what they currently know. P8 said:

> With play-based learning, I think of it as getting the students actually hands-on, exploring and discovering, and then it really is the teacher's moves that make the play meaningful. If they're just playing, they might be having conversations, but if you're not kind of guiding the conversation, asking, 'What are you thinking? Why did you do that? What would you do differently?' That's the process of playing and learning through it, to sort of shine the light on that [new learning] for them.

P6 mentioned the importance of not just hands-on learning in play and imagination, but tapping into how children learn in different ways: "When I think about play-based learning in my classroom, it's when they're using their imagination, and it's hands-on, providing activities that use all their different modalities." P2 went on to further describe using center time to encourage the development of reading and math skills during play through different types of modalities. P6 shared:

> Oh, gosh! I mean, obviously learning through discovery. A lot of STEM leads to that, and a lot of [SSNK] has the STEM within it. I love, for example, in the construction unit where they design something on paper and then build what they designed, and they pretend they do in the kitchen area or the barbershop where they make believe they're cutting hair. It's awesome. We build the 3 Little Pigs houses with huge cardboard boxes, and they get to take turns playing all the characters and acting out the story we read.

P4 also agreed that learning through play involved hands-on exploration through multiple modalities of learning but also highlighted that play connected with learning can scare people away from using the play-based curricula like SSNK.

> I think just that [SSNK] is a great way to allow students to learn hands-on, but not to be scared by the play-based piece, that it's literacy-based as well. It's pretty amazing to watch them learn through their own exploration and show you what they learned through building, drawing, and acting. To see kids you don't think were paying attention actually show you they were through their play is amazing.

Many participants also noted that, with the social aspect and multiple modalities of the SSNK centers, students spent more time actively engaged in their learning, and there was a decrease in behaviors and avoidance compared to other times during the day when teachers followed scripted curricula. P4 highlighted the clear differences between her classroom in the morning, during the scripted curricula, which are mostly seatwork, and the afternoon, when centers take place:

> In the morning, that's when I see the most avoidance, or the most trips to the bathroom, and things like that. During centers, they don't want to leave their spot, whether they have to pee or not. That's the most time we have accidents, I'll tell you that.

P5 also highlighted behaviors that arise during seat work compared to the engagement seen during play-based learning:

> I've definitely noticed that my kids they get very bored with anything that's just sitting and listening to that's non-play-based. They really are their best when they get their student choice, and they get to show their learning and what they love, whether it's building or arts or just acting in drama. So I've had a lot more behaviors this year with the sitting and non-play-based stuff, just rolling around on the rug, or just not wanting to be part of learning.

Several participants also emphasized the importance of not only academic learning through play in kindergarten, but also social-emotional learning. They felt this was also prevalent in the SSNK curriculum. P1 said, when asked what the most significant role play-based learning plays in kindergarten, "Oh, I think that is the biggest, most important, best way that they can work on those social skills with their peers. The social stuff is so important, because when they don't have that, they just struggle." When talking about the play-based learning centers of the SSNK in relation to teaching problem solving and compromising, P7 said:

> They have to work through problems and learn how to compromise and just be more of a team member during center time than during direct instruction

> curricula. It just naturally lends itself to helping them learn how to be people and not just little robots. They have to learn how to think and be creative, and they learn a lot about themselves and others.

P4 agreed, noting that, "We learn how to take turns and ask, use our words to say, 'When you're done at this center, can I come take your spot?'" I feel like centers have made for a friendlier class." Collaboration during centers is a primary part of the SSNK curriculum, making social skill work a daily part of the curriculum. Regarding working together during centers, P6 said, "Especially with the blocks, like the building stations. They were recreating towns and had to communicate a lot for that. Similarly, P7 noted, "I do limit how many kids can go to each center by design. This is so that they have to learn to solve problems and be flexible, and compromise with each other." The SSNK curriculum allows students to move freely between centers, but limits the number of students per center, specifically so that students must learn to compromise and share resources, as well as show compassion, when using the centers.

Time Demands Constrain Play

Another theme that emerged from the data was the limited amount of time given to the SSNK play-based curriculum compared to the time spent on scripted, teacher-directed curricula. Several teachers discussed the scripted curricula their districts mandated they use in conjunction with the SSNK. P1 stated,

> We use [SSNK] but we also have a lot of other curricula we have to use, so it's kind of turned into just fitting it as much as we can. We have the Reveal

> curriculum for math, Sadlier, which is a phonics curriculum, and then we also do the Hegarty phonemic awareness curriculum.

P4, similarly, highlights the number of curricula used throughout the day other than the SSNK curriculum, but also shows the amount of time it takes up in the day. P4 said:

> I start my day in the morning with a morning meeting, and then I usually do the read-aloud that goes with the [SSNK] curriculum during my morning meeting activities. And then we jump right into Hegarty. Then I teach my [university] lesson. Then we have literacy stations, followed by snack and recess. Then we come back and have an hour of math. So, I feel like our morning is very academic-driven.

P5 went further into the time breakdown of the daily schedule with the use of scripted curriculums. P5 stated:

> So we use Phonics to Reading for our phonics curriculum, and we have allotted about 30 minutes in our day for that, but right now it is leaning toward 40-ish, just because it's still new for us. And then that ties into our literacy stations, which is another about 40 minutes. Writing, that's another 30 minutes, then that takes us to lunch and recess. So that takes a lot of my morning already, with the way it's just split up. We come back for read aloud, they go to specials. They come back for math. We use Reveal Math, and we do that for about 45 minutes, too.

Participants were frustrated with the limited time allocated in their schedule for the SSNK curriculum, particularly center time. P1 said, "Centers are a big time for

[learning]. And we're supposed to have an hour for it. We don't. We don't usually have that long." P4 further explained:

> It should be an hour block of time, and that was what was stressed during the [SSNK] training. What I'm finding challenging this year is that our admin decided to kind of micromanage us a bit and assign us a daily schedule. We have to do this, this, this, and this within certain time blocks. And they moved my centers to the end of the day. The way our schedule is, our end-of-the-day block, 2 to 3, is my center block. But by the time we come in, especially during snowsuit season, and to pack up at the end of the day, we're now only getting like a 35- to 40-minute center block.

P5 went on to explain that when more time is needed for scripted curricula, it is taken from the SSNK time block. P5 said:

> It usually means that [SSNK] honestly gets pieces of it taken away. They say, 'Okay, well, it seems you need more time in this, so that means we're going to take some of that center time away.' That happened this year, when they really only scheduled about 30 minutes of playtime into our day, despite knowing the curriculum is supposed to be an hour. But they said, 'We need that 30 minutes somewhere else because this isn't meeting what we need.'

P6 discussed similar time constraint issues within the classroom, resulting in the same reduced 30-minute time allocation for the SSNK curriculum. P6 said, "They have from 2:20 to 2:50. Sometimes it's a little more if they're efficient packing up at the end of the day." P8 discussed being flexible and adjusting the schedule when possible, combining

lessons when feasible to fit in as many play-based pieces as possible. P8 stated, “Some days I might be able to attach the read aloud with writing or switch up the day a little bit. You try to be flexible, but it’s hard to get everything in; there’s never enough time for everything.” P7 shared similar frustration over the lack of time in the daily schedule and the bare minimum amount of time that the curriculum can work with. P7 stated:

> That’s one of the trickiest pieces, because there is never enough time in the day to give adequate time for everything. Ideally, I would like to have a full hour for centers, plus thinking and feedback at the end, and introducing new centers at the beginning. Really, an hour and 20 minutes would be ideal, and I have 40 minutes to finish this year, so that’s one place that I have cut back a little bit. And 40 minutes is the bare minimum. I could not do it with less than that, because they don’t have enough time to really settle in and work together in less than that.

Overall, many teachers found that the time allocated to the play-based learning curriculum was being cut in half. The time devoted to the SSNK curriculum was being diverted to other scripted curricula. For many classrooms, play-based learning was being diverted from prime early-morning learning time to the last block before students went home, making it challenging to implement the program with fidelity.

Standards, Assessment, and Data Demands Constrain Play

The final theme that emerged for RQ1 was around the use of standards, assessments, and data. Based on what participants shared, the SSNK curriculum aligned well with the state learning standards. P4 said, “On each lesson or type of activity, there is a box that tells you the standards it’s covering, or what to ask to be sure you’re

covering those standards." P3 went on to say of the SSNK curriculum when combining play and learning standards, "There's, a lot of provocation questions that you could ask at each center, for each learning standard. They can still meet their learning targets and also play." P7 also discussed using center and station time to meet the learning standards and assess targets, "We really, as a building, have prioritized the center time along with stations, where I really do focus a lot on those concrete skills that get tested and assessed." P6 agreed, discussing the all-encompassing aspect of the SSNK curriculum. P6 said, "It's a really all-encompassing program that covers every aspect of the curriculum. I feel like we are still using SSNK to meet the standards, and I love the play, the art, and the imagination." P5 did caution that there is perhaps too much emphasis on meeting specific standards by the end of kindergarten. P5 said:

> I think that kindergarten has changed a lot to reaching so many expectations that we've taken that play away from a lot of places because we're trying to meet all of these expectations. Some of these standards don't need to be met, and they will be okay. There are some things that can wait till first grade. They don't have to be done in kindergarten

P1 also emphasized there should be less concern about standards in kindergarten, stating, "I mean, it's great, obviously. It's great if they're reading. It's great if they're doing math. But it shouldn't be more important than the social pieces for this age group." P2 shared similar frustrations with meeting standard expectations, stating, "The standards and the growth goals and the benchmarks. It's hard to include [play-based learning]. Do I think it's important? Yes, but until those are changed, it's hard to incorporate [play]."

Frustration continued when discussing ongoing assessments and standardized testing. P5 explained that standard assessments for the districts had to be done separately from play-based learning. P5 said:

> It's separated. It's definitely, 'Okay, I have to get this stuff done for my standard assessments.' And it would be a lot easier to do these assessments with the play-based approach because they're able to show their thinking a lot easier.

P2 explained that the time assessments take away from the intention of the SSNK curriculum. P2 stated:

> If they didn't tell me I had a report card and standards to meet, and I had to make a year's growth in the [Northwest Evaluation Association Assessment] and a year's growth in IXL [a proprietary learning program], I would love [play-based learning]. But those are set in place and can't be changed. The expectations they put on us don't allow us to do [SSNK] the right way.

While standardized and district-wide assessments did not align well with the play-based practices of the SSNK curriculum, participants shared ways they used assessments during play within their classrooms to monitor and track learning. P5 explained:

> I'll go around. I'll look at what they're building in blocks, or what they were building in sand. I was in it with the kids, so I was having those conversations with them, listening to know if they were understanding what we were trying to get at with those centers.

P3 also highlighted assessing learning during center time through pictures. P3 said, "Were they able to complete the provocation question, like 'Can you use these materials

to make a pond?' I have the evidence because I have the photograph, and they're also telling me about it." P6 discussed using games for letter assessment, "I find that when I take data on, say, letter sounds through observation in games, it's much more accurate than when I use [Educational Software for Guiding Instruction] and project it. Their accuracy is much better when they're doing it naturally in a game." Participants felt that play-based centers allowed them to see the day-to-day learning of each student through observation and notes.

In summary, the purpose of RQ1 was to understand teachers' perspectives on play-based learning after they had been trained in the SSNK curriculum. As a result of the data analysis, I found that participants viewed play-based learning as the primary and most appropriate way for kindergarten students to learn foundational skills. They described the SSNK curriculum as developmentally appropriate, hands-on, engaging, and multimodal, which aligned well with the state learning standards. The lack of adequate time for the SSNK curriculum, combined with an increase in demands for scripted curriculum and testing, has led to frustrations with teachers' ability to implement the SSNK with fidelity as intended.

Results for RQ2

RQ 2 asked, "What additional support and training do current and former kindergarten teachers believe they need to implement a play-based curriculum effectively?" The themes of teachers need professional development and teachers need support for professional identity and autonomy emerged in the findings to support this research question.

Teachers Need Professional Development and Support

The first concept in the data regarding support and resources that participants generally agreed on was the SSNK curriculum program at the state level, which offered training and continued support, which participants described as a way to implement the program effectively. P7 said, "State-wise, there's a lot of support. It's primarily because it's the curriculum that the state is putting all of their time and energy into." P3 shared more about the 2-day initial training. P3 explained:

> It was a 2-day training. We had speakers from all over. It was structured very much like a SSNK day, where the presenters came in and we just went through every component of the day. There was actually an opportunity to go into another conference room and actually experience all the centers a hands-on learning experience with lots of movement, sensory experiences, and collaboration. It was a great way to get to know other teachers around the state that were using the program too, and there was not a person in that room that did not absolutely adore SSNK.

P4 also agreed that the training was beneficial by turning the teachers into the students. P4 said:

> The training was really great because it almost made us into the students. We had to be those 5-year-olds taking part in the experience. They showed us how to act out the stories that we read. They showed us how to set up centers. It was really a hands-on training.

P6 highlighted the ongoing support offered in weekly professional learning communities (PLCs) throughout the school year. P6 noted:

> I think I did a couple of [training] sessions online at the beginning of the year, maybe over the summer, maybe even in the spring before I took the position. We were heavy PLC-ing at that time. We had, I think, three PLCs a week, all SSNK.

Along those same lines of ongoing support, P4 shared, "They offer a once-a-month, like, Zoom support group for SSNK teachers. It's just nice when you have those questions, and to hear from other people too."

Participants spoke about the mixed support received for the SSNK program at both the district and building levels. P1 said, "I feel like admin likes to say that they want us doing it, and they want to say that they support us. But I feel like the support is there as long as all these other pieces get done first." P4 shared support for implementation at the district level. P4 stated:

> The [SSNK] training was amazing, and the support people are always willing to email back and forth if you have questions. Our district has been very good about supplying everything we need and giving us the time for it. Well, to be completely honest, I mean our district really had to spend a lot of money to buy the supplies, the read-alouds that went with it, just for [SSNK]. I mean, a play-based learning thing doesn't have to be [SSNK] but our district really put a lot into getting what we needed."

P7 spoke of building-level support, but district-level pushback. P7 said:

> Building-wise, completely [supportive]. District-wise, Central Office really wants us to have a curriculum that works pre-K to 5, so they are cautiously allowing us to use this program. They're not allowing us to call it a 'program'; we have to call it a 'framework for instruction,' and we're all kind of keeping our fingers crossed that they don't make a different decision.

P8 also discussed building-level support that led to expanding the programming within the school, but more indifference from the district level. P8 explained:

> When we started [SSNK] at our school, we really worked hard to collect data and show the district that there was no negative change. There was no dip in the data; it was actually even better—what the kids were producing was of higher quality. We really highlighted that the center time was some of the most successful times of the day for the kids. Having the principal and assistant principal come out and participate in it helped a lot. For the first year or two there wasn't a lot of feedback from the district, but when our district went through a literacy program review, it was like, 'You have the support; the teachers love this; the centers are free and they're one of the most successful times of the day. Now our school does [all the grade level SSNK programs from pre-K to second grade].

P2 similarly felt that building administration supported the play-based curriculum and understood the challenges of integrating with all the other district requirements. P2 commented:

> I feel supported by my principal because my principal knows the dilemma. We've discussed it multiple times. And she's 100% on board with trying to get some

> [play] in, and the biggest bang for your buck, but still meeting all the other requirements, and she's understanding all of that. And she supports that, so I do feel supported. She buys all the materials. I'm a teacher mentor. So I get to show the new teachers what we're doing and how we're doing it and help them try to balance the two.

To sum up, participants found the SSNK training and support provided by the state to be beneficial, as it helped them understand how to implement play-based learning practices in their classrooms. There were mixed feelings on support at the district and building levels. It should be noted that no participant mentioned any specific district or building professional development, training, or ongoing support around the SSNK curriculum or play-based learning.

Teachers Need Support for Professional Identity and Autonomy

The last theme related to RQ2 was teacher identity and autonomy. Many participants discussed a shift in their professional identity and how play-based learning brought joy back into teaching after they were trained in the SSNK program. P4 explained:

> It's kind of been a breath of fresh air, really, because I've been teaching kindergarten since 2004, so I had kind of gotten to the point where I had just had enough. It wasn't fun anymore. We were pushing Lucy Calkins on these kids. And in the district I work in, these kids were coming in way below the ability to do what Lucy wanted. This [SSNK] has left me, like, revived and feeling better about kindergarten.

P7 similarly shared:

> I was kind of a little bit frustrated with the curriculum and the way teaching was going, and, quite honestly, I was burned out and disillusioned with kindergarten, because it didn't feel right. There was no joy in it anymore, and so when the opportunity to be part of this pilot came along, I jumped at it. It was kind of a game changer for me. It sort of brought the joy back into teaching.

P8 shared how SSNK allows for teacher creativity and is new and exciting for her every year. P8 explained:

> Each year, even though you're doing sort of the same unit, the kids do completely different things with it. One year, I put out all the beautiful stuff, and my kids were making owl eyes out of egg cartons. I had one idea about what we'd see, and then they did something completely different. But it's not worse—it's just different—and you get to see the individual kids for who they are, versus, like, 'You have to do it this way.' [SSNK] really does let the teacher be creative. It lets them play into what they're really interested in and play off of what the kids are interested in, so it's very dynamic versus cut-and-paste.

Many participants shared that the SSNK program aligned with their professional beliefs on how children should learn. P3 stated:

> From a personal, philosophical standpoint, I feel like children should have more tactile, hands-on learning opportunities to make sense of their world. Play is very important. I think it's the work of a child. And they can learn while they're doing it. I think they can still meet their learning targets and also be playing.

P4 went on to further state, “Letting go of the need for heavy academics in kindergarten is the biggest thing that everybody needs to do. We need to let them be 5. We need to let them learn in the way that fits them best. P5 added:

> I think that we have to remember that they’re still 5 and 6. I think that kindergarten has changed a lot to reaching so many expectations that we’ve taken that play away from a lot of places because we’re trying to meet all of these expectations. But it’s recognizing, they’re still only 5, so just understanding that this play is really important for kids’ development overall.

While participants held strong professional beliefs about the benefits of play-based learning practices, the data revealed challenges to teachers’ autonomy when implementing the SSNK curriculum and other play-based approaches in their classrooms. The inability to schedule the SSNK center block at a time that best suited the participant and for the required length of time was a significant challenge to teacher autonomy. P4 explained:

> Something I’m finding challenging this year is. Our admin decided to, kind of, I guess you could say micromanage us a bit. And assign us a daily schedule. So we have to do this, this, this, and this in certain time blocks. And they moved my centers to the end of the day. And it’s a lot for kindergarten to wait till the end of the day… I feel like this year I’m not able to give my best to [SSNK], and it’s really disappointing to me and it bugs me, but I can’t do anything about it.

P7 similarly talked about the lack of control with scheduling and not having enough time for that play-based piece. P7 stated:

> The whole day is really centered around whatever the schedule is for the building. We have our specials at a certain time, lunch at a certain time, recess at a certain time, and then we move right into stations, literacy stations, which for me is tricky because it's a lot of student movement and a hard transition, but that's what our school-wide schedule is this year. And so I don't have control over what time of day I do those things. That's one of the trickiest pieces, that there is never enough time in the day to give adequate time for everything. Ideally, I would like to have a full hour for centers plus thinking and feedback at the end and introducing new centers at the beginning. Really, an hour and 20 minutes would be ideal, and I have 40 minutes start to finish this year.

P5 asserted that the lack of teacher autonomy from administration has led to a disconnect and issues of trust in implementing the SSNK, as well as a lack of understanding that play is a form of learning. P5 explained:

> It feels we're not trusted. Like there's some disconnect between us, admin, and the district. Honestly our admin doesn't even really know the [SSNK] curriculum. There was an email conversation [about meeting learning targets], and I was like, well, if you actually knew our curriculum, you'd know why we were doing this (SSNK curriculum). They don't even know it, so then it's it creates a disconnect and distrust between all of us, because they think we're just doing what we want in our rooms.

P3 went on to explain more of the disconnect that happens between play-based learning in the classroom and what is seen from some district perspectives. P3 shared:

> I do think there needs to be more buy-in [from the district] that in kindergarten, play is learning. They are just very unique in that they have very different and unique needs. And play is how you can achieve those targets. I think unfortunately, play is looked at as not doing work. Some districts see it that way. That they're not meeting their targets if they're playing, because play and learning are separate. And I think the word play gets kind of almost turned into, like, a word that means unstructured. And maybe not goal oriented. And playing for playing's sake, not really having a target in mind.: And that's not really the case at all. Even open-ended play has a purpose. Play is just a very important part of a child's development. Probably one of the most important parts of a young child's development.

P7 addressed the disconnect in understanding the use of play-based learning between those working in the classroom and those not. P7 contended:

> I think there's a lack of understanding of development. And people who are not in the trenches with these young children don't really understand how much learning happens through play. And also, that they really think that if you just push them to do more, they can rise to the occasion, and test scores will get better, because you are cramming their little brains with knowledge and skills. That should support test data. However, we see a huge increase in behaviors, and it doesn't actually work that way, but people who don't know young brains really just don't understand that.

P5 effectively summarized the frustrations felt by many participants regarding teacher identity and autonomy in play-based learning. P5 stated:

> I think a lot of it is just to trust us. We have our degrees in education, a lot of us have master's degrees. I'm in the middle of getting mine. We're not just here letting them do whatever we want. We're following [the curriculum] and you just have to trust us with that, and know that learning, it does take time. Some of these things, it does take a few months to develop and show that they have learned what we need them to. It's not fifth grade. It does take time. Just to trust us.

In summary, the purpose of RQ2 was to determine the support and training that teachers needed to implement a play-based curriculum effectively. The findings suggested strong initial and ongoing support from the state SSNK curriculum program. Compared to this, support from building and district-level administration was uneven. The findings also suggested that play-based learning brought joy and passion back into participants' teaching identities; however, the lack of teacher autonomy in scheduling and professional decision making related to play-based learning has created division and distrust between some teachers and the administration.

Summary of Results

Participants described play-based learning as the most appropriate way for kindergarten students to learn foundational and social-emotional skills. They described the SSNK curriculum as hands-on, engaging, and multimodal. The participants agreed that the curriculum aligned well with the state learning standards, and standards were easy to identify throughout the curriculum. The lack of adequate time for the SSNK

curriculum, combined with an increase in demands for scripted curriculum and testing, led to frustrations with teachers' ability to implement the SSNK with fidelity as intended. Participants shared that initial and ongoing support from the state SSNK curriculum program was strong. Compared to this, support from building and district-level administration was uneven. Participants described the SSNK curriculum as bringing joy and passion back into their' teaching identities. However, the lack of teacher autonomy in scheduling and professional decision making related to play-based learning has created division and distrust between some teachers and the administration.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility in qualitative research is determined by the researcher accurately representing the participants' thoughts and feelings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). To ensure credibility in my research, I employed several strategies. First, I kept a reflexive journal to note my thoughts and any biases that arose throughout the research process. Prior to conducting interviews, the content validity of the instrumentation was established through peer review. The validity of the interview questions was confirmed by an elementary school guidance counselor, with over 30 years of experience, who holds a doctorate in education. I also conducted a trial interview with a kindergarten colleague, during which I tested out interview questions to ensure they made sense in practice. After the interviews were complete, I utilized member checks, where each participant was able to review their transcript and contact me if anything did not appear correct or needed to be changed. No changes were needed to any transcripts.

Transferability was supported through a thorough description of the study's context, background, participants, data, and findings, which provides sufficient shared experience to enable the study to be transferable to other settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I provided detailed descriptions of the study context, participants, interview process, and findings to facilitate the transferability of the study to other settings. I used reflexive journaling to ensure I had detailed notes to help with transferability.

Dependability was implemented through an audit trail and member checks. The reader should be able to track how and in what way the data were collected and interpreted (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I used a reflexive journal to keep thorough notes, explaining how and when the data were collected, all decisions made, and any changes that occurred, along with their reasons. Member checks also took place after the interviews were conducted. Participants were able to review their own transcripts for accuracy.

Confirmability was established by addressing biases and prejudices reflexively and reflectively (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I used a research journal to reflect critically on my biases and assumptions throughout the study. I also used an audit trail throughout the research process. I reviewed the transcripts of the interviews against the audio recordings several times to ensure that the transcripts accurately captured the correct responses. My goal was to minimize any biases in the study. Lastly, direct quotes from the participants were used to report the results to ensure that the findings were interpreted accurately from the data.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented the results of this basic qualitative study, which explored kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum. The findings for RQ1 indicated that teachers viewed play-based learning as the most developmentally appropriate way for kindergarten students to learn foundational and social-emotional skills. However, data suggested significant time constraints on the SSNK curriculum, limiting the ability to implement it with fidelity due to increased demands to teach scripted curricula and the time needed for assessments and testing.

The findings for RQ 2 highlighted strong training and ongoing state-level support for the SSNK program. At the district and building level, teachers need more support by having more freedom. Participants reported that the SSNK program brought joy back into teaching; however, they needed more autonomy over their time and scheduling. They also needed to be trusted in their professional judgment and decision making when it came to play-based learning.

In Chapter 5, I will present an interpretation of these findings and discuss any limitations of the study. I will also discuss my recommendations for future research that may arise from this study, as well as the study's limitations. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this study for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum. One-on-one, semistructured interviews were conducted with eight current kindergarten teachers working throughout the study state, and thematic data analysis was performed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase process for thematic analysis. The key findings from this research centered on beliefs about play-based learning versus its implementation. Participants believed that play is the most developmentally appropriate way for kindergarteners to learn and be assessed on their learning. At the same time, they described how time is being taken away from the play-based learning curriculum in favor of scripted curricula to improve test scores. Participants reported receiving training and continued support from the state curriculum designers; however, there were mixed results regarding the support offered by the building and district administration. Participants emphasized the desire to be treated with professional autonomy and trusted to make decisions around play-based learning practices and what is best for their students. In this chapter, I present an interpretation of the findings, discuss the study's limitations, and offer recommendations for future research and implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The first key idea to emerge from this study was that play is a form of learning. Pyle et al. (2020) explained that teachers fall between two ideologies concerning play: either that play is unstructured free time, or that play is a time that can be used in various

ways, where social and academic learning develop. Participants in this study believed that play is where social and academic learning develops. For example, P3 spoke about her beliefs in general when she said, “I feel like children should have more tactile, hands-on learning opportunities to make sense of their world. Play is very important. I think it’s the work of a child. And they can learn while they’re doing it.” P5 gave a more specific example from the play-based curriculum to highlight her beliefs, “I think that it’s a great way to allow students to learn hands-on through building, drawing, and acting. You really get to see the kids learn and really get in and do it with them.” The participants’ beliefs also align with the findings of Wickstrom and Pyle (2023), which indicated that most teachers in the United States believe play is a developmentally appropriate way to learn. Additionally, this finding aligns with the results of Pyle et al. (2020), who discovered a direct correlation between teachers’ ideologies about play-based learning and their work within a school that supported the use of play in learning. All participants worked within a school that had adopted the use of the play-based learning curriculum for the participants to try.

Another key finding in this study was that participants felt they were losing time for play-based learning. Many participants shared that their play-based learning time was getting cut. For example, P7 shared, “Really, an hour and 20 minutes would be ideal, and I have 40 minutes start to finish this year.” Similarly, P5 said, “We do [play-based] centers every day for about 45 minutes. It’s just the way our schedule works; we can’t really do it more than that.” Participants attributed the loss of time to the addition of scripted curricula. For example, P6 shared, “We were heavy in [scripted] curriculum in

our district. So, SSNK, we work it as best we can, but there is no possible way to do every component every day." P4 shared the specific list of scripted curricula she uses, "We jump right into Hegarty. Then I teach my UFLY lesson. Then we have literacy stations, followed by snack and recess. Then we come back and have an hour of math." The loss of play-based learning time aligns with research by Fisher (2021), who highlighted the loss of play-based learning time resulting from the introduction of scripted curricula to meet learning targets better. Allee-Herndon and Roberts (2020) also recognized that play-based learning was being significantly reduced or stopped to make time to teach scripted curricula that were targeted toward learning standards and state testing.

Another key finding in this study was that many teachers felt frustrated that the standards-based assessments and play-based learning did not align and had to be done separately. P5 explained, "It's separated… And it would be a lot easier to do these assessments with the play-based approach because they're able to show their thinking a lot easier." Needing to complete assessments separate from play-based learning aligns with the findings of Pyle, Deluca et al. (2022) on standards-based assessments and play-based learning. Because standards-based assessments are aligned to specific standards, they rarely align with open learning models, making it almost impossible for teachers to administer those types of standards-based assessments during play-based learning (Pyle, Deluca et al., 2022). Participants found that they were able to conduct ongoing assessments within play-based learning. P6 explained, "I find that when I take data on, say, letter sounds through observation in games, it's much more accurate than when I use

ESGI and project it." Messenger and Gallagher (2024) noted a similar assessment technique surfaced in their research and described how a teacher planned oral language intervention groups based on observations made during play.

Another key finding was that participants widely agreed that the initial training and continued support for the SSNK curriculum left them feeling competent in understanding how to use play-based learning with children. Cheung et al. (2022) found that for teachers to successfully utilize play-based learning in their classrooms, they require high-quality, continuous professional development and ongoing support tailored to their specific needs. P6 discussed devoting multiple weekly team meetings to working on play-based learning and problem-solving those specific needs they had. P6 said, "We were heavy PLC-ing at that time. We had, I think, three PLCs a week, all SSNK." Regarding the initial training, P3 shared, "It was a 2-day training. We had speakers from all over. It was structured very much like an SSNK day, where the presenters came in, and we just went through every component of the day." P4 gave an example of the ongoing support offered, saying, "They offer a once-a-month Zoom support group for SSNK teachers. It's just nice when you have those questions, and to hear from other people too." Nesbitt et al. (2025) reported that teachers who were offered a 2-day workshop on play-based learning, followed by 6 months of follow-up support, felt more successful with the curriculum than those who were left to their own devices.

The final key finding of this study was that participants expressed frustration with the lack of professional autonomy in play-based decision making. Rodriguez-Meehan (2021) found that teachers in the United States felt increased pressure to devote more

time to structured curricula to raise test scores. P7 shared her frustrations with this type of testing pressure, noting, “People who are not in the trenches don’t really understand how much learning happens through play. They really think that if you just push them to do more, … their test scores will improve.” P3 spoke of the disconnect between play-based learning and the teaching of standards-based learning: “I think, unfortunately, play is looked at as not doing work. Some districts see it that way. That they are not meeting their targets if they’re playing, because play and learning are separate.” Brown (2024) similarly discussed that the push to meet targets and test scores in kindergarten has separated play from learning.

The findings of my study aligned with Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD framework. Vygotsky postulated that play was not random, but rather an intentional act through pretend and imaginative play, enabling children to enhance their cognitive function. P4 highlighted this type of imaginative play sharing, “They build the ponds with the blocks, they act out being frogs in dramatic play. They show their learning in their actions, in how they talk, and in how they make things.” ZPD is the area of learning development that takes place beyond what a child can accomplish independently but can be learned with adult support. P8 shared about adult guidance during play-based learning, noting, “[I guided] the conversation somewhat. I noticed this about that, or what went wrong. What could you do differently? That’s the process of playing and learning through it. To sort of shine the light on that for them.” The study’s findings align with Vygotsky’s assertion that play is a primary means by which children learn within their ZPD, and support the

idea that with teacher scaffolding, children can acquire new knowledge through play-based learning situations.

In this study, I found that participants agreed on the developmental importance of play-based learning in kindergarten. Many participants felt that the time allocated for play-based learning was shortened, with more time being devoted to scripted curricula. In addition, while teachers in this study reported struggles to incorporate standardized assessments with play-based learning, ongoing assessment practices were evident. Finally, teachers felt the SSNK curriculum provided initial and ongoing training that supported their understanding of how to implement play-based learning effectively; however, they did not feel they had the professional freedom within their classrooms to use the curriculum as they saw fit.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations that may have affected the results of this study. First, one potential limitation is the small sample size. My goal was to recruit 12 participants, but after 5 months and various attempts to reach them, it became apparent that eight participants would be my sample size. The length of time between interviews and resulting differences in the time of year during which the participants were interviewed, may also have influenced their responses. Another limitation of this study is that participants represented only three school districts out of the 26 districts in the focal state. The limited number of districts could potentially restrict the generalizability of the findings to other districts. No other significant issues arose during or after the data collection process.

Recommendations

My first recommendation, given the limitations of the study, would be to replicate it with a larger sample size, as the current study had only eight participants. The SSNK program is state-specific, so it would need to be replicated in the same state. I would recommend exploring alternative means of data collection beyond interviews to increase the sample size and encourage those who might be reluctant to answer questions posed by an interviewer, as that seemed to be a barrier in this study. This could increase the quality of the data and provide more teacher prospective on play-based learning after being trained in the SSNK curriculum.

My second recommendation is for similar studies on play-based curricula to be replicated in other states and regions within the United States to determine if the results are consistent. My study took place in a less populated, rural state with a very homogenous group of participants. To expand this study, I recommend that it be replicated in large states and more urban and diverse areas.

My last recommendation is for research to be conducted on the perspectives of kindergarten teachers who concurrently implement both scripted and play-based curricula, and also on elementary school administrators who must validate scripted and play-based curriculum in light of state assessment guidelines. It may be that administrators presume that alignment of scripted curriculum with assessment goals is stronger than that of play-based curriculum, but without evidence to support that assumption. Additional research on this topic could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these curricula are being integrated into classrooms and how

existing assessment practice reflects the reality of child development and learning. This could enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of using these curricula together.

Implications

The results of this study indicated that teachers need more protected time to implement play-based learning curriculum effectively, utilizing elements of play-based learning in the way they were described in the curriculum. Districts or state education departments might implement a protected play-based learning time that cannot be shortened or utilized for other types of curricula. Additionally, teachers emphasized the numerous scripted curricula being used in their classrooms as competing with time for play-based learning. Districts might consider conducting an audit of the programs used in kindergarten to identify any overlap within the curricula. Including teachers in these discussions could also help validate their professional autonomy and build trust between the administration and educators, an area of concern also highlighted in this study.

Implications for instruction include that teachers interviewed said that the SSNK program effectively utilized specific learning targets tied to play-based centers. By integrating standards-based targets within a play-based system, the SSNK demonstrated that play-based frameworks may be effective within a standards-based system. Schools using play-based curricula may want to consider aligning their play-based program with state learning targets to meet those objectives. State and local administrators may be trained in assessment methods to increase their awareness of the connection between play-based learning and academic standards.

Additionally, teachers reported that play-based assessments, such as observations, conversations, and documentation through pictures, were more effective and developmentally appropriate than standards-based assessments in determining what a kindergartner had learned. Districts and states may consider adopting universally agreed-upon play-based assessment tools that can be used in conjunction with or in place of the standardized assessments currently used in the kindergarten classroom.

Participants described play-based learning as the most developmentally appropriate way for children to acquire foundational skills, develop problem-solving abilities, and regulate their social/emotional behavior. If play-based curricula are implemented correctly, they can lead to kindergarten students' academic success. Additionally, participants noted decreases in disruptive behaviors and avoidance, as well as increased engagement during play-based learning time, which may indicate a greater potential for learning and academic success. Participants also reported that the SSNK program brought new life to their teaching and made them feel less burnt out or exhausted in the profession. Play-based learning has the potential to strengthen teacher autonomy and reduce burnout and stress. Positive social change may occur when administrators and teachers collaborate to implement a play-based learning curriculum with fidelity, thereby contributing to kindergarten students' school success.

Conclusion

In this basic qualitative study, I explored kindergarten teachers' perspectives of the role of play-based learning practices in teaching to state learning benchmarks after being trained in a play-based curriculum. The problem that was addressed through this

study is that the role of play-based learning in the study state new kindergarten (SSNK) curriculum to teach benchmark standards has not been evaluated. I interviewed eight current and former kindergarten teachers, and the data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis. The findings for RQ1 indicated that teachers viewed play-based learning as the most developmentally appropriate way for kindergarten students to learn foundational skills. However, the data indicated significant time constraints on the SSNK curriculum, limiting the ability to implement it with fidelity due to increased time demands for teaching scripted curricula, assessments, and testing. The findings for RQ 2 highlighted a reinvigoration of teaching and strong training, as well as ongoing state-level support, for the SSNK program. At the district and building level, teachers in this study needed more support for autonomy over their time and scheduling. They also needed to be trusted in their professional judgment and decision making when incorporating play-based learning into the kindergarten day. Positive social change may occur when teachers' beliefs in play-based learning are supported by administrators, and when play-based learning curricula are implemented with fidelity, thereby contributing to kindergarten students' school success.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Can you first tell me about your professional background?
2. What is your kindergarten program like at your school? *Can you please tell me more about this?* (RQ1)
3. What do you consider to be play-based learning in kindergarten? (RQ1)
4. What are your thoughts on the role of play-based learning in kindergarten? *Can you please tell me more about this? Can you give me an example?* (RQ1)
5. How do you incorporate play-based learning into your kindergarten class? (RQ1)
6. Have your curriculum and play-based learning routines changed since being trained in the SSNK program? *Can you please tell me more about this? Can you give me an example?* (RQ1)
7. Do you feel any changes are needed to incorporate play-based learning into the curriculum?
    a. Yes: Can you please tell me what changes are needed?
    b. No: What has made incorporating play-based learning successful in your curriculum*?* (RQ2)
8. Do you feel you have support in your and/or training to incorporate play-based learning into the curriculum?
    a. Yes: Can you please tell me a little bit more about the support and training you have had?
    b. No: Can you tell me what kinds of support or training you think would be beneficial? (RQ2)

9. What else about play-based learning would you like to share with me?

Possible follow-up prompts I can use as I interview each participant:

Can you clarify what you mean…?

Please tell me more about…?

Can you give an example of…?

I have not heard that before. Can you explain…?