

Kindergarten Through Play: Integrating Play-Based Learning With Instruction

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

Recommendations:

- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Context

This professional project emerges from my role as a kindergarten teacher and graduate student in the Master of Science in Education program with a concentration in Curriculum Design and Instruction. I work in an elementary school where early literacy development is a priority. As the only kindergarten teacher, I am responsible for meeting clearly defined literacy standards while also supporting the developmental, social, and emotional needs of five- and six-year-old children. My instructional decisions are shaped not only by research-based best practices, but also by district expectations, accountability measures, curriculum pacing guides, and assessment requirements. At the same time, my daily experiences in the classroom continually reinforce that young children learn literacy most deeply through active participation, meaningful interaction, imaginative exploration, and socially connected experiences.

As a kindergarten teacher, I am placed between developmental learning theory and standards-based instruction. Kindergarten classrooms are a unique space in an early elementary setting, where you must integrate early childhood education practices along with traditional formal academic expectations of elementary school. Historically, play has been a foundational form of learning, particularly supporting the acquisition of early literacy skills such as vocabulary, oral language, and narrative development, while also enhancing social and emotional growth. Through play, children engage literacy in lived and meaningful ways by telling stories, negotiating roles, experimenting with language, repairing sounds, interacting socially, and participating in imaginative experiences that make language purposeful and relevant. Due to pressure to prioritize academic outcomes, contemporary classrooms have shifted away from play-based learning toward more teacher-directed instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009; Bassok,

Latham, & Rorem, 2016). This has resulted in reduced opportunities for meaningful learning through play or with play used only in ways disconnected from children's authentic experiences, participation, and meaning-making.

Kindergarten Literacy Through Play: A Standards-Aligned Guidebook project takes place in the broader context of early childhood education in the United States, where debate about the role of play, academic rigor, and developmental appropriateness continues to shape curriculum decisions. Kindergarten teachers are encouraged to implement play-based learning while simultaneously being held accountable for students' progress toward literacy standards. As a result, educators are often asked to balance institutional expectations with instructional approaches that reflect how young children naturally develop language and literacy through exploration, interaction, movement, imagination, and shared activity. In the classroom, this creates tensions for educators who understand how young children learn best and what they are expected to teach in relation to curriculum implementation and assessment. As a result, play is sometimes treated as an enrichment activity, a reward, or a break from "real learning" instead of being recognized as a meaningful context through which children participate in literacy-rich experiences and construct understanding through social and imaginative engagement. This project will result in the design of a play-based, standards-aligned kindergarten literacy curriculum guidebook that positions literacy as a lived, participatory experience while also supporting standards-aligned instruction.

Early childhood research consistently highlights that play is not separate from learning but rather a central tool for developing foundational skills alongside social competencies (Weisberg et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2017). It is a method through which young children develop essential academic and social skills through active participation, relational interaction,

imaginative exploration, and embodied engagement with language and meaning. As Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2011) emphasize, play serves as a primary mechanism through which young children learn, rather than something separate from academic work. This perspective highlights the importance of intentionally integrating playful learning experiences within literacy instruction instead of positioning play as separate from academic learning. Within play, literacy becomes meaningful because children use language in authentic contexts through storytelling, dramatic play, collaboration, movement, conversation, and shared experiences.

On a personal note, I observed this tension firsthand when teaching my son in kindergarten. He struggled in a traditional, skill-focused classroom but thrived when learning was structured around playful, meaningful activities that connected to his interests, relationships, bodily participation, and developmental readiness. Seeing my son thrive in a playful, meaningful classroom strengthened my belief that literacy instruction must intentionally integrate play with standards-aligned learning. This guidebook positions activities like dramatic play, literacy games, storytelling, and collaborative problem-solving as central to literacy development because they allow children to inhabit language through participation, imagination, movement, social interaction, and shared meaning-making experiences.

The young individuals impacted by this work are kindergarten students who are developing foundational literacy skills. This includes phonological awareness, vocabulary, oral language, print concepts, and early writing skills. These students bring diverse backgrounds, experiences, and levels of readiness into the classroom, making it a priority that instruction, specifically literacy, is flexible, engaging, and meets each student's individual needs. Play-based learning offers opportunities for educators to differentiate instruction and increase authentic

engagement, by allowing children to physically, socially, emotionally, and verbally participate in literacy experiences in ways that reflect their developmental needs and lived experiences.

Educators are also highly influenced by this play-based, standards-aligned kindergarten literacy guidebook; they must navigate the complex intersection of academic rigor and developmental needs. Kindergarten educators must manage competing demands while also attempting to create literacy experiences that feel meaningful, participatory, developmentally responsive, and connected to how young children naturally learn through interaction and play. While there is research that supports the value of play in early literacy development, educators often receive no or limited professional development or curriculum resources to establish play in instruction in ways that meet both developmental and academic needs and expectations. This lack of clear design is often exacerbated by a scarcity of professional development specifically targeted toward helping educators create literacy-rich play experiences that support both academic learning and children's expressive, social, and imaginative participation.

Administrators and curriculum leaders are an additional important audience that benefit from this play-based guidebook. School leaders are responsible for supporting instructional quality, ensuring standards alignment, and fostering classroom environments that support meaningful, developmentally responsive learning experiences for young children. Without a shared vision of how play-based learning can function within a standards-aligned curriculum, administrators may unintentionally discourage play-based approaches or struggle to evaluate their effectiveness. A clearly articulated curriculum guidebook has the potential to support understanding between educators and administrators, enhancing coherence in classroom instruction.

My academic experiences within the MEd Curriculum Design and Instruction program have helped shape the context of this project. Through coursework focused on curriculum design, instructional theory, assessment, and ethical considerations in education, I have developed a deeper understanding of how curriculum frameworks influence classroom practice.

This professional project represents my ongoing effort to integrate educational theory with classroom practice in the context of my own teaching. Instead of viewing play-based learning and standards-aligned instruction as competing priorities, this work frames play as a meaningful context through which young children experience literacy, construct understanding, participate socially, and develop language in authentic and embodied ways. The context for this work is therefore both personal and professional, grounded in daily classroom experience and informed by academic engagement with curriculum and instructional design.

By placing a play-based, standards-aligned literacy guidebook within the lived realities of kindergarten classrooms, this work recognizes that literacy learning is not only cognitive, but also social, relational, imaginative, and embodied. The development of a play-based, standards-aligned kindergarten literacy guidebook responds to the need for instructional approaches that honor how young children learn while meeting the expectations placed on educators and schools. This project provides a conceptual framework that offers educators clear design principles, illustrative examples, and supportive alignment strategies while emphasizing children's participation in meaningful, literacy-rich experiences. While it does not prescribe exact lessons, the guidebook offers practical guidance for intentionally integrating play experiences into standards-aligned instruction, supporting both educators' planning and children's opportunities to become expressive, engaged, collaborative, and confident participants in literacy learning . This project demonstrates how rigorous academic learning can emerge through

playful, participatory, and developmentally responsive literacy experiences that honor the ways young children naturally learn and communicate.

Rationale

The rationale for this professional project is located in a persistent and well-documented challenge within early childhood education: the tension between developmentally appropriate play-based learning and the ever-increasing demand for standards-aligned literacy instruction in kindergarten classrooms (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Daphna Bassok et al., 2016). Research consistently shows that play supports young children's cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional growth (Kathy Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Jennifer M. Zosh et al., 2017). Within play, children encounter literacy through participation, imagination, storytelling, conversation, movement, and shared social experiences that make language meaningful and purposeful. However, contemporary education policy and classroom practice often prioritize narrowly defined, easily measurable academic skills, which can reduce opportunities for children to engage with literacy in developmentally meaningful and socially interactive ways (Daphna Bassok et al., 2016; Alliance for Childhood, 2009). This misalignment creates a significant curricular and instructional gap, affecting educators, students, and the school system as a whole. In many classrooms, literacy risks becoming disconnected from the lives, relations, and imaginative experiences through which young children naturally develop language and understanding.

For the kindergarten level, literacy instruction is typically shaped by outside pressures that include curriculum pacing guides, benchmark assessments, and state or district standards. As a practitioner in the field, I have observed that these stipulations can lead to instruction practices that prioritize isolated skill knowledge, worksheet-based learning, and teacher-led direct

instruction instead of literacy experiences grounded in interaction, participation, storytelling, exploration, and meaning-making. As a result, play is often reduced or used for short periods of free choice or as a standalone time not integrated into literacy instruction and goals. This shift limits developmentally appropriate practice and reduces opportunities for children to engage deeply with language through embodied, social, and imaginative experiences. Rather than actively using language in meaningful contexts, children may instead encounter literacy as a disconnected set of isolated academic tasks.

The need for this guidebook emerges from the limited availability of practical curriculum models that clearly demonstrate how play-based literacy experiences can support meaningful participation in language and literacy development while remaining connected to standards expectations. Many educators value play and recognize its instructional potential, yet they often lack practical guidance for designing literacy experiences in which children actively construct understanding through play, collaboration, storytelling, movement, dramatic roles, and social interaction (Angela Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Although research strongly supports the role of play in early childhood learning, fewer studies provide practical curriculum models that illustrate how play can be systematically integrated with standards-based instruction (Jennifer M. Zosh et al., 2017; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Many curriculum resources either emphasize child-directed play without clearly connecting literacy experiences to instructional goals. For example, early childhood approaches such as Reggio Emilia approach-inspired programs or HighScope models emphasize exploration and inquiry (Loris Malaguzzi, 1998; HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2012), while many district-adopted literacy programs prioritize scripted instruction and skill-based assessment (Daphna Bassok et al., 2016). This tension can contribute to instructional uncertainty and

inconsistency, while also reducing children's engagement, motivation, and opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive growth (Kathy Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Alliance for Childhood, 2009) .

For educators, this gap creates professional tension. Kindergarten educators are frequently asked to justify their instructional choices to administrators, families, and policymakers. In many cases, academic rigor is often equated with visible teacher-led instruction, worksheets, and measurable outcomes rather than with children's active participation in meaningful literacy experiences. Without a shared framework or common language for discussing play-based literacy instruction, educators may feel pressure to disregard practices they know support children's language development, imagination, social interaction, expressive communication, and meaningful engagement with literacy. This literacy based guidebook seeks to resolve the professional tension I have experienced by creating a well-thought out curriculum framework that supports literacy as a lived and participatory experience rather than as a collection of isolated academic tasks.

Students in the classroom are directly affected by this gap. Kindergarten students benefit from instructional approaches that are engaging, motivating, and interactive, particularly those that integrate play with literacy skills development. Play-based literacy opportunities promote oral language development, vocabulary acquisition, narrative skills, phonological awareness, and early writing through social interactions, imaginative participation, storytelling, movement, conversation, and meaningful shared experiences (Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Justice & Kaderavek, 2004; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In addition, students will benefit from enhanced cognitive, social, and emotional development through collaborative, imaginative, embodied, and problem-solving play. The reduction of play within literacy instruction can create

an environment where students may experience learning as fragmented or disengaged, specifically students who benefit from engagement with language-rich environments. When literacy instruction is integrated with play, the curriculum provides children with more flexible and varied opportunities to express what they know and understand.

Administrators and curriculum leaders often struggle to support play-based instruction while also meeting standards and accountability requirements while also supporting developmentally meaningful literacy experiences for young children. In the absence of clear curriculum models, school leaders can struggle to evaluate play-based practices or share their instructional value to stakeholders. This can create inconsistent assessment methods and expectations in classrooms and grade level due to the lack of an early literacy program. By providing a standards-aligned guidebook grounded in research and theory, this work creates a tool for fostering shared understanding of how literacy learning can emerge through play, participation, social interaction, and meaningful engagement.

This guidebook connects to broader trends in education that call for curriculum designs that balance academic rigor with student engagement, developmental responsiveness, and equity. National organizations and scholars in early childhood education emphasize the importance of developmentally appropriate practice, culturally responsive teaching, and integrated approaches to learning. At the same time, schools function within systems that require evidence of student progress that clearly indicates meeting standards. The need to balance these priorities highlights the relevance and timeliness of this professional project.

The rationale for this work is further informed by my professional experience and academic training within the MEd Curriculum and Instruction program. Through my coursework and reflective practice, I have come to understand the curriculum not only as a

collection of lessons, but also as a structure that shapes how children experience learning, language, participation, and meaning-making within the classroom environment. This project reflects my effort to apply that understanding to a recurring challenge in early childhood education by developing a curriculum framework that has both a theoretical basis and a practical application.

This guidebook strives to fill a critical gap in the field by creating a clear and intentional approach to integrating play-based learning with meaningful kindergarten literacy experiences. By providing clear design principles, alignment strategies, and illustrative applications, this guidebook advances the ongoing conversation about how to efficiently support young learners as active participants in language-rich, socially connected, and imaginative literacy experiences within contemporary educational contexts. The anticipated outcome is increased clarity, confidence, and instructional knowledge, benefiting educators, students, and educational communities. For students, the guidebook is expected to enhance engagement, foster creativity, and support the development of foundational literacy skills through meaningful, developmentally appropriate learning experiences. For educators, it offers practical guidance for designing instruction that balances academic expectations with play-based literacy experiences that honor how young children naturally learn.

Connect

This professional project is situated within several significant and ongoing conversations in early childhood education, curriculum design, and literacy instruction. At its core, the project connects with the continued question of how to best support young learners in educational systems that increasingly highlight academic accountability while simultaneously recognizing the importance of developmentally appropriate practice. By creating and proposing a play-based

standards-aligned kindergarten literacy guidebook, this project touches on the broader trend that calls for integrated, intentional approaches to curriculum design rather than a forced choice between play and academic rigor. This framing puts literacy not only as a set of measurable skills, but also as a lived, participatory experience in which children actively engage with language through play, interaction, imagination, and meaningful social contexts.

One of the central ideas pushing this work is Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), a foundational framework in early childhood education that highlights alignment between instructional practices and children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020). Developmentally Appropriate Practice highlights that effective early childhood instruction incorporates academic learning with play, exploration, and meaningful interaction within supportive learning environments (NAEYC, 2020). Within this framework, literacy learning is understood as emerging through children's active participation, communication, and engagement with meaningful experiences rather than through isolated skill practice alone. In kindergarten literacy instruction, developmentally appropriate practice moves away from repetitive skill drills, emphasizing learning experiences that are meaningful, responsive to children's development, and connect to real-world contexts. This project embraces DAP as a foundational principle, positioning play not as an option but as an essential process of effective literacy learning.

Also connected to developmentally appropriate practice is sociocultural learning theory, which highlights the inclusion of social interaction, language, and cultural context in learning. From a sociocultural perspective, literacy development is a social process in which children construct meaning through interaction with peers, adults, and texts (Vygotsky, 1978). These interactions are often embodied in nature, occurring through gesture, movement, role-playing,

shared storytelling, and collaborative engagement with language in real and imagined contexts. Play-based learning easily aligns with this view by creating opportunities for collaborative dialogue, shared problem solving, and authentic language use through lived and interactive experiences (Weisberg et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2017). This project draws on sociocultural theory to position play-based literacy experiences as settings in which children actively negotiate meaning, practice emerging literacy skills, and develop oral language in socially meaningful ways.

This initiative also leans on constructive theories of learning, which shares that learners actively construct knowledge instead of passively receiving information. In early literacy, this construction occurs through lived participation in language-rich experiences where children use, test, and refine meaning through interaction, play and communication. In classrooms, instruction is designed to build on students' prior knowledge, interests, and experiences. Play-based learning shares this orientation by enabling children to explore concepts, test ideas, construct literacy understanding through hands-on, social, and imaginative experiences (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Another significant factor shaping this guidebook is the increasing emphasis on standards-based education and accountability. Literacy standards share important learning goals and provide a shared language for instruction and assessment. In this project, standards function as guiding reference points that support instruction, while the primary focus remains on how children experience literacy through participation, interaction, and meaningful engagement. If literacy standards are implemented without attention to developmental needs, they can result in instructional practices that do not reflect how young children naturally develop language through interaction, play, and lived experience. This undertaking applies literacy standards through developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum design and by making standards aligned

through intentional and explicit instruction. The guidebook presents play as a rigorous instructional strategy through which children actively engage in literacy, using language in meaningful, social, and imaginative contexts that support both skill development and authentic participation in meaning making.

The principles of equity and access represent a final important viewpoint through which this body of work is situated. Play-based literacy instruction supports the needs of diverse learners by providing multiple opportunities for engagement, expression, and participation. Learning literacy skills occurs through meaningful play. Students who may struggle with traditional instructional formats are offered opportunities to demonstrate understanding through action, dialogue, collaboration, and other embodied forms of literacy expression. This project aligns with wider educational processes to design a curriculum that is inclusive, culturally responsive, and meets the diverse needs of children and how they learn and communicate.

Multiple key terms lead the conceptual framing of this guidebook. Play-based learning is defined as instructional experiences in which children engage in purposeful, self-directed, and socially interactive activities through which literacy is experienced as participation, meaning-making, and embodied engagement with language, ideas, and peers. Standards-aligned instruction refers to curriculum and teaching practices that are connected to established literacy standards while remaining responsive to developmental needs. Curriculum framework is understood as a guiding structure that supports instructional decision-making, and alignment strategies rather than a scripted program or set of daily lesson plans. These definitions reflect the project's emphasis on flexibility, intentionality, and professional judgment.

Alignment

This professional project aligns directly with the learning outcomes of the Master of Science in Education degree in Curriculum Design and Instruction by demonstrating the application of professional expertise, the use of research and evidence to support learning, and the development of professional leadership attributes. In particular, this project applies these competencies to the design of literacy experiences in which young children actively participate in language-rich, meaningful, and play-based contexts. Through the design of a play-based, standards-aligned kindergarten literacy curriculum guidebook, this project serves as the culminating application of knowledge and skills developed across the MSED program to the design of a curriculum framework that emphasizes literacy as a lived, participatory experiences for young learners.

Application of Professional Content Expertise, Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions.

This undertaking reflects the effective application of professional content expertise, knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with the education profession. As a kindergarten teacher, I rely on pedagogical knowledge of early literacy development, child development, and curriculum design to identify and address a continued challenge that is seen in early childhood education related to how literacy instruction can remain both standards-aligned and responsive to children's lived, embodied, and play-based ways of learning. The project presents professional dispositions such as reflective practice, ethical responsibility, and commitment to developmentally appropriate instruction. By designing a curriculum guidebook instead of embracing a scripted program, this work shares advanced professional judgment and instructional decision-making that prioritizes children's active participation in literacy through play, interaction, storytelling, movement, and meaningful engagement with language.

Use of Research and Evidence to Support Learning and Professional Practice

This professional project aligns with the MSED outcome of using research and evidence to develop environments that support and assess learning and professional practice.

The guidebook includes research-based principles of play-based learning and early literacy instruction and is rooted in established theories for learning and development. Evidence from professional literature informs the design principles, standards alignment, and assessment approaches included in the guidebook. Additionally, this guidebook highlights real assessment practices that support instructional decision making and ongoing professional reflection opportunities.

Development of Professional Education Leadership Attributes

The MSED Curriculum Design and Instruction degree consists of coursework across four areas: the Professional Education Core, the Curriculum Design and Instruction Major, Elective and Exit Requirements. This work represents the culminating experience of the program, integrating learning from each area into an encompassing body of work that centers children's lived experiences as learners within literacy-rich, play-based environments. Coursework from the Professional Education Core informs the project's grounding in theory, ethics and reflective practice. The Curriculum Design and Instruction Major aligns directly to the project's focus on curriculum design, instructional alignment, and assessment. Elective coursework supports the development of specialized knowledge and skills that are relevant to early literacy and instructional approaches. The professional project fulfills the Exit Requirement by combining these areas into a comprehensive curriculum guidebook that demonstrates readiness for advanced professional practice in education.

Project Design, Implementation, and Assessment

This professional project includes the design and development of a play-based, standards-aligned kindergarten literacy curriculum guidebook. The project focuses on developing a clear framework that integrates research-based principles of early literacy, developmentally appropriate practice, and play-based learning to support children's meaningful participation in literacy through lived, interactive, and embodied experiences. Instead of collecting new data from students, the project draws on professional expertise, research, and standards to design and articulate a curriculum framework that prioritizes how children experience literacy through participation, interaction, imagination, and play. The implementation of the project keeps to a structured and multi-phase process focused on designing a curriculum that connects standards to lived literacy experiences in developmentally meaningful ways.

Phase 1: Foundation and Research (Month 1-2)

- Identify foundational research in early literacy, play-based learning, and developmentally appropriate practice with attention to how children experience literacy through participation, interaction, and embodied engagement;
- Map out kindergarten literacy standards (state and national) as supporting reference points for designing meaningful, play-based literacy experiences;
- Evaluate existing thematic seasonal curriculum units previously developed in my MSED work in relation to how they support or limit children's meaningful participation in literacy learning;

- Describe design principles that will guide the guidebook with an emphasis on participation, meaning-making, relational learning, and embodied engagement with literacy.

Phase 2: Guidebook Design (Month 3-4)

- Specify design principles aligning play-based instruction with literacy standards while prioritizing children's active participation in literacy through play, interaction, storytelling, movement, and meaning-making experiences;
- Develop guidelines for teacher implementation, assessment strategies, and instructional alignment that support literacy learning as a lived, social, and participatory experience in play-based contexts;
- Create illustrative thematic units and sample lessons that show how play-based literacy instruction works in practice through interactive and meaningful literacy experiences;
- Determine that the guidebook is flexible, adaptable, and responsive to diverse learners by supporting diverse methods for participation, expression, communication, and engagement in literacy learning;

Phase 3: Review and Refinement (Month 5)

- Seek informal feedback from colleagues on clarity, usability, and how effectively the guidebook reflects children's meaningful participation in literacy experiences;
- Refine curriculum illustrations and sample units to meet alignment with literacy standards while maintaining a strong emphasis on meaningful, play-based literacy participation;
- Refine language and organization to finalize clarity for teachers and administrators.

Phase 4: Documentation and Dissemination (Month 6)

- Finalize written guidebooks, include design principles, alignment tools, illustrative units, and assessment guidance that emphasize literacy as participation in meaningful, play-based experiences;
- Create and organize supplementary materials, such as charts or guides, to enhance implementation and support educators in creating literacy experiences focused on interaction, meaning-making, and play;
- Share the guidebook and materials with a professional audience for potential inclusions and dialogue around play-based literacy instruction in early childhood education.

Time Frame

This project is organized to be accomplished over a six-month period, aligning with the timeline of the final two terms of the MEd program. The timeline provides a manageable, sequential approach that balances research, design, and modifications while allowing for reflection on how the framework supports meaningful literacy participation in early childhood classrooms. Each phase of the timeline allows for reflection, review, and integration of professional insights related to children's engagement, participation, and lived literacy experiences.

Assessment of Success

Success will be measured through multiple lenses:

1. **Alignment with research and standards:** Clear connections between play-based literacy activities and kindergarten literacy standards that reflect how children engage in literacy;

2. **Practical usability:** Feedback from others for clarity, coherence and usage, and the extent to which the guidebook supports meaningful, play-based literacy participation for children;
3. **Professional growth:** Demonstrate application of MSed program learning outcomes with emphasis on designing curriculum that centers children's lived experiences as active participants in literacy learning;
4. **Contribution to the field:** The guidebook utilized as a resource for educators and administrators, to support dialogue around literacy as a participatory, play-based, and developmentally responsive experience for young children.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction & Guiding Question

In recent years, increased pressure on kindergarten classrooms to meet rigorous academic standards has resulted in reduced play-based learning (Daphna Bassok et al., 2016; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). The shift has created a gap between developmentally appropriate practice and standards-driven instruction, positioning play as a separate mode—or even in opposition to academic learning. This separation often obscures the ways in which children naturally experience through participation, interaction, imagination, and embodied engagement in play-based contexts. For early childhood educators, this dissociation of play inclusion in the classroom has raised critical questions about how to balance academic demands with practices that meet young children’s developmental, social, emotional, and communicative and experiential learning needs.

Historically, early childhood research has sometimes been interpreted to suggest that play-based learning is not compatible with academic rigor. When designed intentionally, play can be a powerful instructional approach enhancing engagement, self-regulation, social competence, and children’s active participation in meaning-making through language, interaction, and embodied experiences. Instead of viewing play as unstructured or supplemental, scholars argue for its role as a purposeful pedagogical strategy aligned with learning objectives and standards while remaining grounded in children’s lived experiences as active participants in learning.

In this review, I examine research on play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. Particular attention is given to how play supports children’s participation in literacy-rich learning experiences across core content areas, while also connecting to standards as guiding reference points. This review also explores the developmental and social-emotional benefits of play and

considers how these benefits support young learners' academic success. The review synthesizes research on instructional effectiveness, developmental theory, and educational policy to establish a foundation for the professional project. This professional project provides educators with practical, low-preparation activities that support play-based, participatory literacy experiences aligned with standards.

Search Process & Selection Criteria

To inform this review, I used the following databases: ERIC; Education Source; PsycINFO ; Google Scholar Primary Search Terms: “Games and play as instructional tools; Play-based learning and academic outcomes; Play supports social, emotional, and self-regulation skills; Gaps in research, policy and classroom play related to kindergarten.”

This literature review took a systematic search process with multiple education-focused databases. Searches were conducted prioritizing peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and foundational early childhood research published within the last 15-20 years with a focus on how children experience learning through play, interaction, and meaning-making.

Key Search Terms & Results

Search Term	Database	Approx. Hits	Notes on Usefulness
Play-based learning kindergarten	ERIC	1,200 +	Highly relevant Foundational studies
Game-based learning early childhood	ERIC	800+	Useful for instructional framing
Kindergarten standards play	Google Scholar	500+	Helped connect standards & play
Social Emotional Learning play	PsycINFO	900+	Strong SEL connections

Search Term	Database	Approx. Hits	Notes on Usefulness
Literacy instruction play-based	Education Source	650+	Content-specific insights
Math games kindergarten	ERIC	700+	Practical and research-based
Inquiry science play early childhood	ERIC	600+	Aligned with NCSS practices

Criteria for Selecting Relevant Literature

Articles were selected based on the following criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal publications
- Focus of early childhood or kindergarten populations
- Direct connection to play, games, or developmentally appropriate practice
- Empirical studies, systematic reviews, or well-established theoretical frameworks
- Relevance to literacy, math, science, and/or social-emotional learning as experienced through play-based, interactive, and embodied learning contexts

Key Terms & Definitions

- **Play-Based Learning:** Instructional approaches that embed learning objectives within child-centered, exploratory activities in which children actively participate in meaning-making through interaction, imagination, movement, and social engagement (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Elkind, 2007);
- **Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP):** Teaching aligned with children's developmental stages and individual needs and focuses on how children engage in learning (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020);

- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** Development of skills related to self-regulation, relationships, emotional awareness, and socially embedded participation in shared experiences (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020);
- **Standards-Aligned Instruction:** Teaching practices intentionally connected to state or national academic standards that guide reference points for designing meaningful, play-based, and participatory literacy experiences (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).

Theme 1: Play as an Academic Instructional Tool

Play as Purposeful Instruction in Kindergarten

A substantial body of early childhood research challenges the concept of play-based learning as an enrichment or free-choice activity. Instead, research increasingly describes play as a purposeful instructional strategy that can support academic learning goals. This shift moves play away from being viewed as an unstructured activity. It positions play as an intentional pedagogical approach with defined learning objectives that are experienced through children's active participation, interaction, and meaning-making within learning environments.

Across the literature, a central theme emerges around the idea that play-based learning is most effective when it is intentionally structured rather than left entirely unstructured or replaced by direct instruction. Research on guided play emphasizes this balance, showing that optimal learning occurs when children maintain agency while educators intentionally design environments and interactions to target specific learning goals (Beth M. Weisberg et al., 2014). Rather than positioning free play and direct instructions as opposing approaches, this work frames guided play as a bridge between the two. Academic content is embedded within

instruction as part of engaging, purposeful experiences in which actively participate in literacy-rich and content-rich contexts aligned with standards.

This perspective is reinforced by learning sciences research emphasizing the conditions under which young children learn best. Kathy-Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues (2015) highlight that learning is most effective when it is active, socially interactive, meaningful, and engaging—conditions that are naturally supported within well-designed play environments. Together, this body of research suggests that play is not separate from academic learning but instead serves as a method through which deeper understanding can occur when it is intentionally structured. This alignment between developmentally appropriate practice and standards-based instruction directly informs the design of this project, integrating academic expectations within child-centered, participatory, and meaning-rich play-based learning experiences.

Academic Outcomes Across Content Areas

Research consistently demonstrated that play-based learning can positively impact academic outcomes throughout literacy, mathematics, and science when it is intentionally aligned with learning goals and standards. In mathematics, Julie L. Ramani and Robert S. Siegler (2008, 2011) found that number board games significantly improve young children's understanding by engaging them in hands-on, interactive, and socially mediated experiences with numerical concepts. Suggesting that structured play experiences make abstract mathematical concepts more concrete and accessible. These findings align with early childhood mathematics standards focused on counting, cardinality, and operations, as play-based math experiences allow children to engage in hands-on problem solving that strengthens both conceptual understanding and confidence.

In literacy development, Douglas H. Clements, Julie Sarama, and Jennifer M. Zosh (2011) emphasizes that play-rich classroom environments increase opportunities for oral language development, vocabulary, and narrative skills through storytelling, role-playing, dialogue, collaboration, and socially embedded literacy experiences. Similarly, Karen L. Fisher and colleagues (2011) argue that role-playing, storytelling, and interactive literacy centers support authentic language use by embedding literacy skills within meaningful social contexts rather than isolated skill drills. This integration allows children to apply literacy skills in purposeful ways, strengthening comprehension and communication simultaneously.

In science education, research also supports the effectiveness of play-based and inquiry-driven approaches. Rebecca L. Toub and colleagues (2016), along with Beth M. Weisberg, highlight that guided play helps bridge the perceived divide between playful learning and academic rigor by embedding scientific thinking within structured yet exploratory experiences. When children engage in scaffolded hands-on investigations, they more actively observe, question, predict, and experiment, which aligns directly with kindergarten science standards and reflects authentic scientific reasoning.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that play-based learning is not confined to a single subject area. Instead, it functions as a lived and embodied context through which children actively construct meaning across literacy, mathematics, science, and social interaction. When play is thoughtfully designed, it can support standards-aligned instruction while still maintaining developmental appropriateness. This cross-disciplinary impact reinforces the need for the current professional project. This guidebook integrates structured academic goals with purposeful and engaging learning experiences across multiple subject areas in which children actively participate in meaning-making through play, interaction, and embodied engagement.

Educator Role and Instructional Intentionality

The effectiveness of play as an instructional tool is closely connected to the intentional role of the educator in shaping environments where children actively participate in literacy-rich, meaningful, and embodied experiences. Pyle and Daniels (2017) describe a continuum of play-based learning ranging from child-directed play to educator-guided activities, emphasizing that learning outcomes are strongest when educators intentionally embed curricular goals into play experiences. This perspective highlights that play alone does not guarantee learning unless it is designed and facilitated in ways that support children's engagement in meaningful, socially interactive, and language-rich experiences. Similarly, Ageliki Nicolopoulou (2010) provides insight that play becomes most educationally valuable when educators actively structure environments, guide interactions, and connect play experiences to language and literacy development as lived, social, and embodied experiences through which children construct meaning. When educators intentionally scaffold play, children are more likely to engage in meaningful dialogue, problem solving, and narrative development that support early academic skills. Research by Kathy Hirsch-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff (2009) highlights that guided play - where teachers provide learning goals while allowing children choice within play, supports engagement and academic development by creating conditions in which children actively participate in meaning-making through interaction, imagination, and language use. In addition, scholars such as David Elkind (2007) and Doris Bergen (2009) highlight that play supports cognitive, social, and language development when educators intentionally design learning environments that encourage exploration and interaction. For kindergarten classrooms in particular, intentional play-based instruction can support early literacy development. Across studies this reinforces the idea that educators play a critical role in shaping play experiences that

promote meaningful learning outcomes by designing environments where children actively engage in literacy, communication, and shared meaning-making through play..

Several scholars note that play-based instruction is frequently underdefined in both research and practice. While research highlights positive outcomes, studies vary in how play-based learning is conceptualized and implemented, leading to inconsistencies in how play-based learning is interpreted across educational contexts and in how children's participation, engagement, and meaning-making are understood within instruction (Lillard et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2017). Researchers have also shared that the term *play-based learning* can include a wide range of options, from free play to guided play and educator directed activities that vary in the degree to which children are supported in actively participating in meaningful, literacy-rich experiences (Alicia Pyle & Erica Danniels, 2017). Furthermore, much of the present research examines short-term interventions rather than sustained classroom practice, creating gaps in understanding how ongoing play-based instruction relates to long-term academic success and sustained development of children's communicative, relational, and literacy-based meaning-making abilities (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015; Marilyn Fleeer, 2018).

Synthesis and Implications

Across studies, the literature suggests that play can be used as an effective instructional approach across multiple content areas when aligned with learning objectives, standards and intentional teaching practices. Scholars such as Alicia Pyle and Erica Danniels (2017) emphasize that play-based learning can support academic outcomes when educators integrate curricula within play experiences that position children as active participants in literacy-rich, meaningful, and socially constructed learning contexts. Intentional implementation of play-centered instruction provides a developmentally responsive pathway to engaging with kindergarten

standards through interactions, communication, and play. However, gaps remain in translating research findings into accessible and classroom ready strategies that educators can implement that require minimal preparation and materials. Much of the existing research focuses on theoretical frameworks or short-term interventions rather than practical instructional models that can be sustained in everyday classrooms and that reflect how children naturally learn through play, interaction, imagination, and social meaning-making. As a result, many educators recognize the value of playful learning but report uncertainty about how to design play experiences that both support academic standards and children's participation in meaningful, play-based literacy experiences. This gap highlights the need for a practical resource that models how standards-aligned play can be used in everyday kindergarten instruction. In response to these gaps in this literature, this professional project seeks to translate research on play-centered instruction into a practical, classroom-ready guidebook that emphasizes literacy as a lived, participatory, and embodied experience for young children. While play supports academic learning, research also emphasizes its role in children's social and emotional development.

Theme 2: Social-Emotional & Developmental Benefits of Play

Play as a Foundation for Social & Emotional Development

A second theme in early childhood research is the role of play as a foundational context for children's social and emotional development. Scholars highlight that play provides young learners with natural opportunities to develop self-regulation, cooperation, emotional expression, and problem-solving skills through live participation in social, interactive, and meaning-rich experiences with peers and adults. These skills are essential for successful participation in academic learning environments. In kindergarten classrooms, young learners are still developing these foundational skills. Playful learning provides a connection between social development and

academic engagement by positioning learning as a relational and embodied experience rather than a set of isolated developmental skills.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory positions play as a primary context through which children internalize social norms and develop high-order thinking skills. According to Vygotsky, play creates a zone of proximal development in which children practice behaviors and skills beyond their independent capabilities through interaction, collaboration, and shared meaning-making with peers and adults in lived, situated contexts. Contemporary scholars continue to build on Vygotsky's framework, emphasizing the social and cultural nature of learning in early childhood settings. For example, Marilyn Flee (2018) highlights how play environments can support concept formation from intentionally scaffolded children's learning within social contexts. Similarly, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson (2019) demonstrates how play-based learning environments allow children to engage in collaborative meaning-making, reinforcing the sociocultural processes originally described by Vygotsky. Collectively, research consistently shows the continued relevance of sociocultural theory in understanding how play supports learning and academic readiness in early childhood education.

Self-Regulation, Executive Function, and Learning Readiness

Research consistently links play-based experiences to the development of self-regulation and executive functioning as children engage in sustained, socially interactive, and embodied participation in meaningful play contexts. Elena Bodrova and Deborah J. Leong (2007) argue that mature, intentional play requires children to follow rules, negotiate roles, and regulate their behavior, all of which are directly connected to later academic success. Engaging in sustained play experiences, children practice managing emotions, attention, and behavior in ways that extend beyond traditional teacher-directed instruction commonly used in classrooms because

they are embedded in authentic, socially meaningful contexts rather than isolated skill practice. Similarly, Adele Diamond and Karin Lee (2011) further indicate that interventions emphasizing play, movement, and social interaction are among most effective approaches for supporting executive function development in young children. Together, these findings suggest that play is not separate from academic learning but instead serves as a method through which deeper understanding and meaning-making occur through embodied participation, interaction, and communication. This control is necessary for academic tasks such as listening, problem-solving, and sustained attention in kindergarten settings as part of children's lived experience in collaborative, structured, and playful learning environments.

Social Interaction, Language, and Emotional Competence

Play functions as a critical context for language development and social communication, both are closely related to emotional competence and emerge through children's active participation in shared, socially meaningful experiences. Berk, Mann, and Ogan (2006) highlight the role of make-believe play in enhancing narrative skills, perspective-taking and emotional understanding through collaborative storytelling, role negotiation, and embodied participation in imaginative experiences. As children manage roles and storylines, they engage in complex language use that supports both expressive and receptive language development. Denham, Bassett, and Wyatt (2012) highlight that emotionally supportive, play-rich environments foster children's ability to recognize and regulate emotions, build relationships, and resolve conflicts. These skills are particularly important in kindergarten settings, where children are learning to navigate literacy, language, and social participation simultaneously. In these settings young learners must navigate peer interactions and classroom expectations while continually engaging

in academic learning through interaction, communication, and participation in shared classroom experiences.

Synthesis and Critique of Literature

While the research highly supports the social-emotional benefits of play, limits remain in how these outcomes are examined, particularly in relation to children's lived participation in meaningful learning experiences. Many studies highlight developmental gains without directly connecting social-emotional growth to academic learning outcomes. A separation between SEL and academic instruction is not the desired outcome, as children experience learning, communication, emotion, and social interaction as interconnected and relational processes. Further research focuses on observational or short-term studies, limiting understanding of how play-based participation shapes long-term learning and development. This limits the conclusions about the long-term use of play-based learning and continued academic success.

Beyond these limitations, the research clearly shares social-emotional development as foundational to learning, instead of a supplemental add-on. The skills formed through play include self-regulation, communication, and emotional competence. Leading to enhance students' ability to engage with academic contexts through socially situated interaction, dialogue, and embodied participation in learning. This piece of research enhances the importance of instructional approaches that intentionally include social-emotional learning within academic contexts so that literacy and learning are experiences simultaneously in a meaningful process.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this body of literature suggest that learning through play provides a developmentally responsive approach to meeting both social-emotional and academic needs of young learners in a kindergarten classroom. Research consistently highlights the benefits of play

for engagement, language development, and cognitive growth when learning experiences are intentionally designed by educators to support children's active participation, interaction, and meaning-making in shared learning contexts. However, several gaps remain between research and classroom practice. First, educators often lack concrete examples of how to implement play-centered instruction that integrates academic standards while still preserving children's active participation in meaningful, embodied, and socially interactive learning experiences. Second, many studies highlight the theoretical benefits of play but provide limited guidance on how to intentionally integrate social-emotional development within standards-based instruction. In addition, existing research frequently focuses on short-term interventions rather than sustained classroom practices that reflect the children's learning through play, interaction, and meaning-making over time. These gaps highlight the need for practical, classroom-ready strategies that integrate play, academic learning, and social emotional growth in ways that are manageable for educators. The project connected to this review aims to address this need for providing a practical guidebook that models how play-based learning can be embedded within everyday kindergarten instruction while supporting both academic standards and social-emotional development.

Theme 3: Play, Standards, & Accountability

Play & Standards-Aligned Learning

An increasing body of research supports the idea that learning through play can align with academic standards by placing literacy, math, and science learning within meaningful, socially interactive, and embodied experiences in which children actively participate. Play provides hands-on, engaging contexts in which kindergarten students actively participate in literacy, math, and science experiences with learning objectives created through meaningful

interaction, exploration, and shared activity. Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple (2020) share that developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) includes integrating play intentionally to help children meet academic goals without sacrificing developmental responsiveness. Building on this perspective, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues (2009) highlight a “mandate for playful learning,” which puts play as a lived, socially interactive, and meaningful context through which academic expectations are experienced by children. While simultaneously remaining developmentally appropriate when instruction is intentionally designed to engage children in active academic participation.

Additional research also suggests that playful learning environments allow children to apply academic concepts in authentic contexts that promote deeper understanding and engagement. For example, Jennifer M. Zosh et al. (2017) describes playful learning as an approach that supports academic development through active exploration, social interaction, and meaningful problem solving. When educators intentionally design play experiences around learning objectives, children can practice foundational literacy and numeracy concepts while remaining actively engaged in the learning process through meaningful participation in play-based, socially created learning experiences. These findings suggest that play-based instruction can function as a complementary approach to learning that supports both academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms.

Motivation, Engagement, and Classroom Climate

Play strengthens intrinsic motivation and engagement, helping young learners sustain effort during challenging tasks. Research by Adele Diamond and Kathleen Lee (2011), as well as Kathy Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2015), highlights that playful learning contexts create supportive environments in which children experience learning as relational, meaningful, and participatory

rather than isolated tasks. When learning activities include play, children are more likely to remain engaged and persist through challenging tasks. Cooperative and interactive play also enhance positive peer relationships, communication skills, and classroom community. All of the previously mentioned attributes of a classroom environment support social-emotional and academic development as interconnected outcomes of children's participation in classroom communities of learning (Anthony D. Pellegrini, 2009). Additionally, David Whitebread (2012) suggests that playful learning environments promote self-regulation and collaborative problem solving, further supporting classroom climates that encourage active and sustained engagement in learning.

Equity & Inclusion

Play-based activities can be easily differentiated to support diverse learners, including English language learners and children with developmental delays, by allowing multiple forms of participation in shared, social interactions, and meaningful learning experiences. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020) highlights that using hands-on, movement-based, and visually rich games reduce barriers to participation and promote meaningful engagement for young learners with various needs. Play allows students to demonstrate understanding through multiple modalities including movement, language and social interactions. Scholars such as Susan B. Neuman and Anne Roskos (2005) emphasize that play-rich environments support language development and literacy learning for diverse learners by providing opportunities for communication and vocabulary development. Similarly, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests that engaging, student-centered instructional approaches can assist in reducing gaps by providing authentic and meaningful learning experiences that reflect how children naturally learn

through interaction, exploration, and participation in activities. Collectively, these studies suggest that play-centered instruction is not only engaging but also serves as a practical strategy for creating inclusive and equitable classroom environments.

Gaps in Research

Evidence supporting play benefits is widely available; however, most of the research focuses on early childhood rather than specific context of kindergarten classrooms within standards-driven educational systems and accountability structures. There is also a lack of guidance for low-preparation, minimal supplies activities that both integrate social-emotional learning and academic standards as interconnected dimensions of children's participation in classroom learning experiences. This gap points directly to the need for practical, classroom ready resources that model how play can function as a lived, participatory context for literacy and learning.

Conclusion: Research Gaps and Implications for the Professional Project

Summary of Findings

Across the three themes, the literature consistently demonstrates that playful learning in kindergarten supports multiple aspects of student development with intentional instructional goals. Research provides evidence that play can effectively support academic learning in literacy, mathematics, and science when activities are guided by clear objectives and aligned with standards. In addition, play-based approaches enhance critical social-emotional competencies, including self-regulation, executive functioning, and emotional development as children participate in socially interactive, embodied, and meaningful-rich learning experiences. The literature further suggests that thoughtfully designed play and activities increase student

motivation, engagement, and equity by expanding opportunities for participation in meaningful, play-based classroom experiences.

Together, these findings show that play is more than a recreational component of early education. It is a research-supported pedagogical strategy that addresses both the development and academic learning needs through children's participation in socially created, play-based learning experiences.

Identified Gaps in the Literature

Beyond the strength of existing research, several notable gaps remain. First, most of the literature addresses early childhood education broadly, resulting in limited kindergarten-specific guidance classrooms operating within standards-driven and accountability-focused instructional contexts. As accountability pressures increase, educators require clear examples of how play-based learning can be intentionally included within kindergarten curricula while maintaining children's active participation in meaningful, embodied, and socially interactive learning experiences.

Also, there is a lack of research focused on practical, low-preparation play-based strategies that create meaningful participation, interaction, and embodied engagement while remaining accessible in classrooms. Strategies that require minimal materials yet remain academically rigorous. Many studies highlight the benefits of play, few provide tangible, classroom-ready examples that are doable within the constraints of daily instructional demands without reducing learning to isolated skill practice or decontextualized activities. Additionally, most of the research highlights short-term outcomes, leaving a gap in the impact of long-term play-rich environments.

Finally, social-emotional learning is frequently cited as a benefit of play; few studies specifically examine how SEL outcomes are directly connected to academic learning, yet there is limited research framing both as integrated portions of children's lived participation in classroom learning experiences. This lack of integration indicates a need for instructional models that intentionally connect social-emotional development with academic learning goals within active, play-based contexts that reflect how children learn naturally through interaction, language, and shared activity.

Chapter 3: Project Design and Development

Context

Play is a central part of how young children learn, yet is often positioned as a secondary to academic instruction in kindergarten classrooms despite research showing it as a primary context for children's participation in meaning-making, communication, and learning. In my experience as a kindergarten educator, I have consistently seen the tension between developmentally appropriate instruction versus play-based learning with the expectation to meet standards-aligned instruction. Students are expected to reach specific academic benchmarks while also developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills. This creates a complex instructional environment where educators are asked to balance multiple priorities while designing experiences that support children's academic, social, and embodied participation in classrooms.

The context described in Chapter 1 directly informed the creation of this professional project. As the only kindergarten teacher in my district, I am responsible for designing instruction that meets standards while also creating meaningful, developmentally responsive, and participatory learning experiences for young children. These responsibilities are created by district expectations, curriculum pacing guides, and assessment requirements, all influencing my instructional decision-making. Within this context, play is often minimized or separate from academic instruction rather than being recognized as the context through which literacy and learning are actively constructed.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 further reinforces the need for a structured approach that places play as the lived context of learning in which academic, social, and emotional development are interconnected through participation. Research consistently highlights the

benefit of play-based learning supporting academic outcomes, social-emotional development, and student engagement when implemented intentionally. However, there is a gap remaining between research and practice, as educators often lack practical models that share how to align play with academic standards in everyday classroom instruction.

This guidebook was designed in response to these contextual and instructional challenges. The *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook was designed to provide educators with a clear, research-informed structure for integrating play-based learning within standards-aligned literacy instruction. The sections that follow describe the design approach, project components, development process, timeline, and plans for dissemination.

Project Design Approach

The design of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook followed a practitioner-centered approach focused on intentionality, practicality, and the design of active learning environments grounded in research and classroom realities. The goal of this guidebook was not to conduct formal research, but to create a practical and meaningful guidebook that educators can actually use in their classrooms.

This project was shaped by ongoing reflection on my own teaching and a process of trying, adjusting, and improving ideas over time based on children's participation, engagement, and meaning-making in classrooms. I thought carefully about what strategies are not only effective, but also realistic within the day-to-day structure of classrooms where learning occurs through interaction, play, and shared activity. Rather than collecting formal data, the design was guided by classroom experience, supported by research, and grounded in the challenges described in Chapter 1.

The guidebook is grounded in the theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter 2. Developmentally Appropriate Practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020) serves as a foundational principle, emphasizing the importance of designing learning environments that reflect how children actively participate in learning through interaction, exploration, and play. Sociocultural learning theory (Lev Vygotsky, 1978) further informs this framework by highlighting the role of social interaction, language, collaboration, and shared participation in learning. In addition, research on guided play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015; Weisberg et al., 2014) supports the integration of child-centered exploration with intentional design of classrooms that highlight children's participation in meaningful, socially interactive experiences.

A key point in the design of this work was usability. In this case, usability means that educators can easily understand, implement, and adapt the guidebook to fit their own classrooms. The goal was to keep the guidebook clear, flexible, and practical. The strategies and examples are designed to require minimal preparation and materials, recognizing the time constraints educators face. Instead of a scripted curriculum, the guidebook offers guided ideas, alignment tools, and examples that support educators' professional judgment in facilitating participatory, play-based learning experiences aligned with instructional goals.

By facilitating the project in both theory and practice, the design approach shares an effort to cover the gap between research and classroom application. This balance helps ensure the guidebook is both grounded in research and realistic for everyday classroom use while centering children's lived participation in meaningful, socially interactive learning experiences.

Project Description and Development

The *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook was developed as a practical, teacher-facing instructional resource designed to support classroom instruction through intentional, play-based, and socially interactive learning experiences in which children actively participate in learning. The final product is a digital document (PDF/manual) that educators can use to plan, implement, and adapt play-based instruction within a standards-driven kindergarten classroom. The guidebook is organized as a flexible resource that includes design principles, examples of participatory learning experiences, instructional supports, and adaptable play-based activities.

The guidebook is structured around three interconnected pieces that emerged both from the literature and classroom experience: play-based instructional design, standards alignment, and integrated social-emotional learning. These three components were selected because they reflect the key areas where I have seen the greatest disconnect between expectations and classroom practice. These components reflect the understanding that effective kindergarten instruction must support children's academic learning, developmental growth, and active participation in meaningful, socially interactive experiences.

The first component focuses on play-based instructional design. This section outlines the key principles for creating purposeful play that supports active participation in meaningful, embodied, and socially interactive learning experiences. It includes suggestions on designing activities such as centers, hands-on activities, and collaborative games. These approaches emphasize student engagement, language development, hands-on learning, and meaningful learning experiences.

The second component focuses on standards alignment. This piece of the guidebook provides tools and strategies for connecting play-based activities to kindergarten academic

standards as a way of describing and organizing learning that occurs through participation in play. Instead of treating play as separate from standards, this component highlights how academic skills such as phonological awareness, vocabulary development, oral language, and early writing skills can be met within play-based experiences. Alignment tools assist educators in identifying learning objectives and ensuring that instructional activities meet the required academic expectations and standards.

The third component centers on integrating social-emotional learning within instruction. This section includes strategies that enhance students' ability to participate in self-regulation, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving through play-based learning experiences. Activities included are designed to support both academic learning and social-emotional development. These activities highlight research that supports connection between play and social-emotional development as it emerges through interaction, communication, and shared activity.

Throughout the development process, emphasis was put on the flexibility and adaptability of activities that can be adapted to support play-based learning experiences within classroom instruction. The guidebook was designed to support diverse learners and can be modified based on classroom and student needs along with instructional goals. Examples include providing clarity while still providing educators the opportunity to activities to their own teaching style and classroom contexts.

By organizing the guidebook around these components, the project provides a cohesive structure that connects theory, standards, and classroom practice by situating learning within play-based, socially interactive, and embodied experiences of participation. The design reflects the findings of Chapter 2 while addressing the practical needs identified in Chapter 1 while

reflecting the theoretical understanding of learning as a lived, participatory process described in Chapter 2.

Reflection and Revision Process

The development of the *Kindergarten Through Play* Guidebook was guided by ongoing reflection and revision as I continuously evaluated each component for clarity, practicality, and how effectively it supported children's participation in meaningful, socially interactive, play-based learning experiences. My reflection was grounded in my own instructional experience, as I considered whether each element would realistically fit within the time, structure, and demands of a typical kindergarten day while preserving meaningful participation in learning. Ensuring the guidebook remained practical rather than overly theoretical or complex in ways that would limit children's active participation in learning experiences. Informal feedback from colleagues also supported the revision process by offering perspectives on how the guidebook facilitated children's engagement, interaction, and participation in play-based learning experiences. Simultaneously, highlighting the importance of clear organization, concise explanations, and adaptable strategies that can be effectively implemented across diverse classroom settings.

Based on these reflections and conversations, revisions were made to improve clarity and language so that the guidebook clearly represented learning as a participatory, embodied, and socially constructed process. Feedback helped strengthen how play-based activities represented and supported academic learning as it emerges through children's participation in meaningful experiences. This process allowed the guidebook to develop into a resource that is both research-informed and grounded in classroom experience while centering children's lived participation in play-based learning as the foundation of instruction.

Timeline and Organization

The development of this professional project was structured over a six-month period, aligned with the final two terms on my MEd program. The timeline was intentionally designed to allow for research, design, reflection, and revision of the guidebook for play-based learning experiences in kindergarten classrooms.

The project was developed in three phases. The first phase focused on reviewing and organizing literature related to play-based learning, early literacy, and developmentally appropriate practice to establish a theoretical foundation centered on learning as a socially situated and embodied process of participation. The second phase included developing the framework structure, including the creation of design principles, standards alignment tools, and examples of play-based literacy activities. Within the design of the guidebook an emphasis was placed on clarity, organization, and alignment with research on children's participation, interaction, and meaning-making in early learning contexts. The third phase centered on review and refinement, during which informal feedback from colleagues was incorporated to better understand how the guidebook supported children's engagement, interaction, and participation in play-based learning experiences. The final phase includes the completion and organization of the guidebook into a cohesive format for sharing and dissemination as a framework for designing play-based, socially interactive learning environments in kindergarten classrooms. At the time of submission of Chapters 1-3, the guidebook is largely developed and in the final stages of refinement.

Flexibility was maintained throughout the timeline to allow for ongoing reflection and to balance full-time teaching responsibilities while continuously refining a framework for play-based learning grounded in classroom experience and research.

Final Project and Dissemination

The final product of this project is a *Kindergarten Through Play* digital instructional guidebook designed as an educator-facing resource to support the integration of play-based learning within standards-informed, kindergarten learning experiences.

This guidebook serves as a practical curriculum resource rather than a single lesson or activity list. It is organized into structured sections that include design principles for play-based learning, examples of participatory learning experiences, instructional planning tools, sample lesson ideas, and classroom-ready play-based activities that educators can implement or adapt to meet the needs of their students.

The purpose of the guidebook is to provide educators with a usable, flexible resource that supports intentional instructional planning where play and academic learning are meaningfully integrated through socially interactive and developmentally responsive learning experiences.

Dissemination of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook will occur through multiple professional avenues, including the final course presentation. Following completion, the guidebook will also be shared with colleagues, administrators, my mentee teacher, and other educators interested in play-based learning and instruction. This resource is intended to serve as both a practical classroom tool and foundation for ongoing collaboration and professional learning focused designing and supporting play-based learning environments within early childhood classrooms.

Conclusion

The completion of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook represents both a professional accomplishment and a meaningful reflection of my growth as an educator and curriculum designer. The purpose of this project was to create a practical, standards-aligned

literacy guidebook that intentionally integrated play-based learning into kindergarten instruction. Through the process, I looked to address the ongoing challenge of balancing developmentally appropriate practice with increasing academic expectations in early childhood education.

Through the creation of this project, I gained a better understanding of how purposeful play can serve as an effective and meaningful instructional approach for supporting early literacy development. What began as a desire to preserve play in the kindergarten classroom moved into a deeper understanding of play as an intentional and research-supported method for teaching academic skills. This change in perspective strengthened both the design of the guidebook and my own instructional philosophy.

The process of creating this project provided significant opportunities for professional growth. I grew my skills in curriculum design, instructional planning, assessment development, and reflective practice. Additionally, I developed a greater appreciation for the role of research in informing instructional decisions and the importance of aligning educational practice with both academic standards and developmental needs. Working through the challenges of time management, scope clarification, and assessment design further reinforced the importance of flexibility and adaptability in professional practice.

This project reaffirmed my commitment to creating learning environments where young children are engaged, supported, and valued as capable learners. It strengthened my belief that academic learning and joyful, play-based experiences are not mutually exclusive, but complementary when designed thoughtfully. As an educator, I am now confident in my ability to advocate for developmentally appropriate practice and to design instruction that supports the whole student.

The *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook is both a practical instructional resource and a reflection of my journey as a graduate student and educator. The knowledge and skills gained through this process will continue to influence my teaching practice and professional decision-making moving forward. I will take this experience with me as I continue to grow as an educator committed to meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning for all students.

Chapter 4: The Project

Introduction

This chapter presents the completed professional project, a play-based and standards-aligned kindergarten literacy guidebook designed to support early childhood educators in creating play-based literacy learning experiences in early childhood classrooms. The project was developed in response to the growing tension between academic expectations in kindergarten classrooms and the developmental needs of young children. As discussed in Chapter 1, increased pressure to meet rigorous academic standards has often reduced opportunities for developmentally appropriate, play-based learning in early childhood classrooms. Research reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated that play-based instruction supports literacy development, student engagement, and social-emotional development when learning is understood as emerging through meaningful participation in social, language-rich experiences.

The purpose of this project was to create an educator-friendly guidebook that supports educators in designing learning environments where literacy development emerges through intentional, play-based, and socially interactive experiences. This chapter provides an overview of the completed guidebook and describes the major component of the project. The chapter provides an overview of the completed guidebook and describes the major components of the project. The chapter is organized by sections of the framework, including the project philosophy, play-based literacy strategies, planning supports, and assessment tools.

The full project can be accessed through the attached Google Drive link. A downloadable version of the document is attached that includes visually engaging, accessible, and educator-friendly design intended to support sharing and professional dialogue among educators.

Google Link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1N3KJtfGR0H4hVs921EkuHoRAdie7CDIMIZC8TKX_0uY/edit?usp=sharing

Downloadable Activities:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15ycRTTM6TORh7r6JL1O068S2o6wxS4Kq/view?usp=sharing>

Project Type and Format

The completed professional project is a play-based kindergarten literacy framework presented in the form of a practical educator guidebook. The framework was designed as both a printable and digital resource intended to support kindergarten educators in creating developmentally appropriate play-based literacy learning experiences within early childhood classrooms. The project includes instructional guidance, literacy activity ideas, planning supports, classroom implementation suggestions, and assessment tools that support educators in designing learning environments where literacy develops through socially interactive and meaningful participation.

Intended Audience

The intended audience for this project includes kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, instructional coaches, and teacher candidates interested in implementing play-based literacy instruction within standards-driven classrooms. The framework was specifically designed for educators seeking practical ways to support play-based literacy learning experiences that are responsive to both developmental needs and academic expectations.

Purpose and Structure of the Framework

The purpose of the framework is to support educators in creating play-based literacy learning experiences in which children develop oral language collaboration, engagement, and early literacy understanding through active participation in meaningful play.

The framework is organized into four major sections:

1. Framework Philosophy and Purpose
2. Play-Based Literacy Activities
3. Planning and Classroom Supports
4. Assessment and Reflection Tools

Each section was intentionally designed to support practical classroom implementation while remaining grounded in research-based instructional practices. It is also grounded in the understanding that literacy development emerges through children's participation in socially interactive, play-based learning environments.

Major Components of the Framework

Framework Philosophy and Purpose

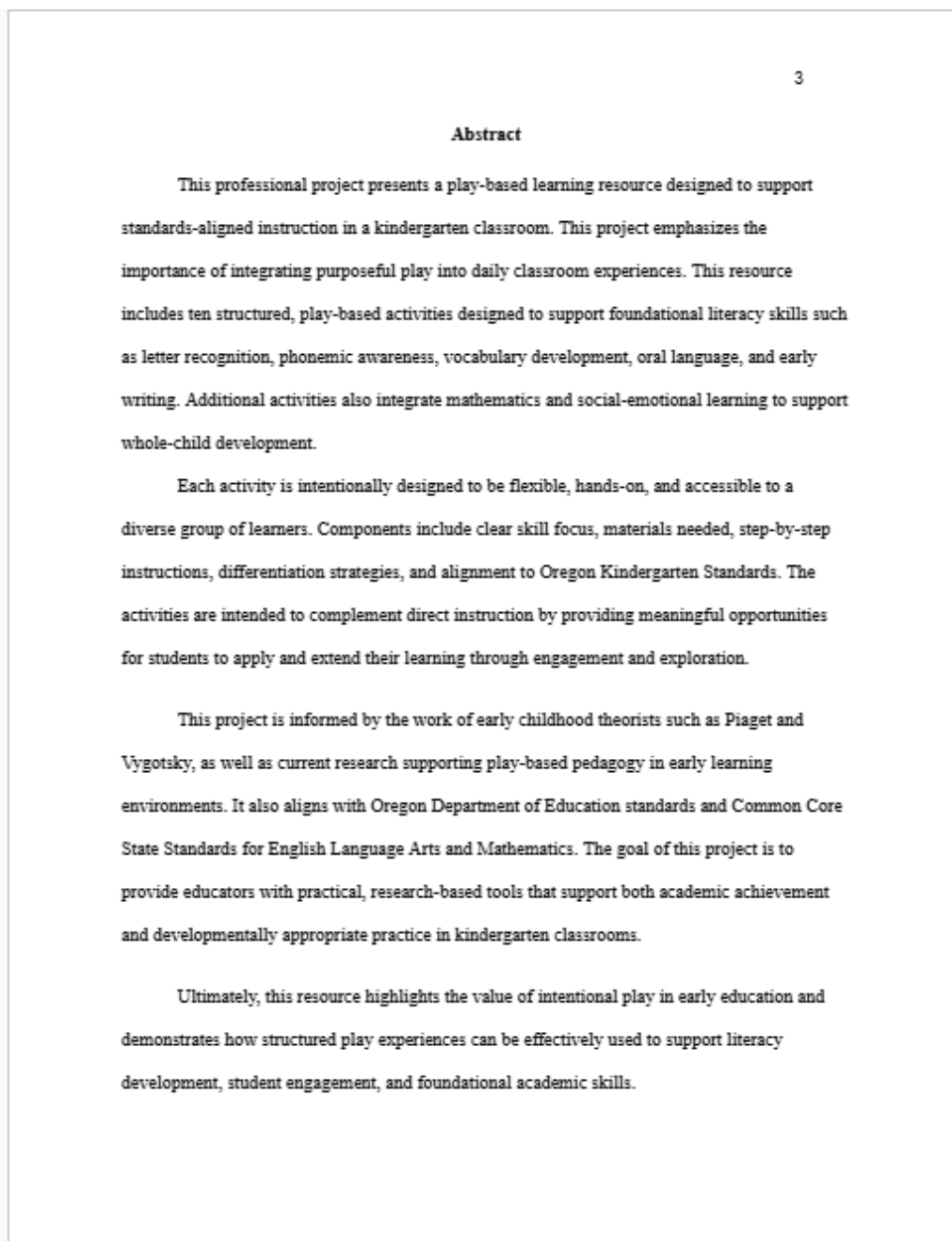
The opening section of the framework introduces the overall philosophy, goals, and purpose of the project. This section explains the importance of developmentally responsive, play-based learning environments in which literacy development emerges through children's active participation in meaningful classroom experiences. It discusses how play supports literacy learning, student engagement, communication, and social-emotional growth as interconnected dimensions of children's lived participation in classroom learning experiences.

The introduction also explains how educators can use the framework within classroom instruction and literacy planning by supporting the design of participatory, play-based learning

experiences. Teacher-friendly language and clear organization were intentionally used throughout the guidebook to promote accessibility and ease of implementation.

Figure 1

Framework Introduction and Philosophy Pages



WHY PLAY?

Play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate and research-supported approach that promotes academic, social, and emotional growth in young children. In kindergarten, where students are typically five- to six-years old, learning through play aligns with how children naturally explore, make meaning, and engage with the world. Rather than separating play from instruction, integrating purposeful play into the classroom enhances learning outcomes across content areas.

Research consistently shows that play supports cognitive development by allowing children to actively construct knowledge through hands-on experiences. According to Jean Piaget, young children learn best through active exploration and interaction with their environment. Similarly, Lev Vygotsky emphasized the importance of social interaction and play in advancing learning within a child's zone of proximal development. When children engage in structured play, they practice language, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills in meaningful surroundings.

In early literacy development, play provides authentic opportunities for children to develop foundational skills such as oral language, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and writing. For example, dramatic play centers encourage storytelling, role-playing, and conversation. All of these activities and more work to strengthen expressive and receptive language skills. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, play-based learning fosters language-rich environments where children can experiment with new words and concepts in a low-risk, engaging setting. This is especially important in kindergarten, where oral language development is closely tied to later reading success.

In addition to academic benefits, play supports social-emotional development, which is critical for school readiness and long-term success. Through play, children learn to cooperate, take turns, negotiate, and regulate their emotions. These skills are essential for forming a positive classroom environment and supporting student engagement. Research by Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues highlights that playful environments increase motivation and engagement.

Importantly, play-based learning does not mean a lack of structure or rigor. Intentional, standards-aligned play allows educators to embed academic goals within meaningful activities. When educators design play-based experiences with clear learning objectives, they can effectively support literacy, math, and other content areas while maintaining high expectations for student learning. This balanced approach ensures that kindergarten classrooms meet academic standards while carrying out the developmental needs of young learners.

In conclusion, integrating play into kindergarten instruction is both an effective and essential practice. It supports whole-child development, strengthens early literacy skills, and fosters a love of learning. By intentionally incorporating play-based strategies, educators can create engaging, equitable learning, and academically rich learning environments that set a strong foundation for future success.

Connection to Research

This section reflects the research discussed in Chapter 2 regarding developmentally appropriate practice and the importance of play in early childhood education. Research reviewed in the literature demonstrated that play-based instruction supports oral language development,

student motivation, literacy growth, and meaningful engagement. As these outcomes emerge through children's participation in socially interactive and meaningful learning experiences.

The framework philosophy was also influenced by constructivist learning theory and research emphasizing learning as an active, socially constructed process. In this view, children develop understanding through participation, interaction, and engagement in play-based contexts.

Play-Based Literacy Strategies

This section of the framework includes practical examples of play based literacy activities and instructional strategies that educators can implement in kindergarten classrooms. The activities were designed to support play-based learning experiences in which literacy develops through hands-on, socially interactive engagement.

Examples of strategies included within the framework are:

- Dramatic play literacy activities
- Interactive storytelling experiences
- Oral language development opportunities
- Collaborative literacy games
- Hands-on alphabet and phonics activities
- Literacy-rich center ideas

Each activity includes a description, suggested materials, instructional focus, and possible classroom applications. It also includes an informal assessment component intended to help educators notice and respond to children's developing literacy understandings as they occur through play-based experiences.

As shown in Figure 2, the activity pages provide organized examples of literacy instruction through play.

Figure 2

Sample Play-Based Literacy Activities

10

Activity 1: Alphabet Construction Zone

Skill Focus:
Letter recognition and formation

Materials Needed:

- Toy blocks (Legos, wooden blocks, etc.)
- Alphabet cards
- Paper and crayons/markers

How to Play:

1. Students choose a letter card.
2. Using blocks, they build the shape of the letter.
3. Students say the letter name and sound.
4. Students draw the letter on paper.
5. (Optional) Students think of a word that starts with that letter.

How to Incorporate / Extend:

- Have students work in pairs to build words
- Challenge students to build lowercase vs. uppercase letters
- Add a writing extension: draw and label a picture using the letter

Standards Connection:

- Recognize and name upper- and lowercase letters
- Demonstrate understanding of letter-sound relationships

Cross-Curricular Connections:

- Math: shapes and spatial awareness
- Fine motor development

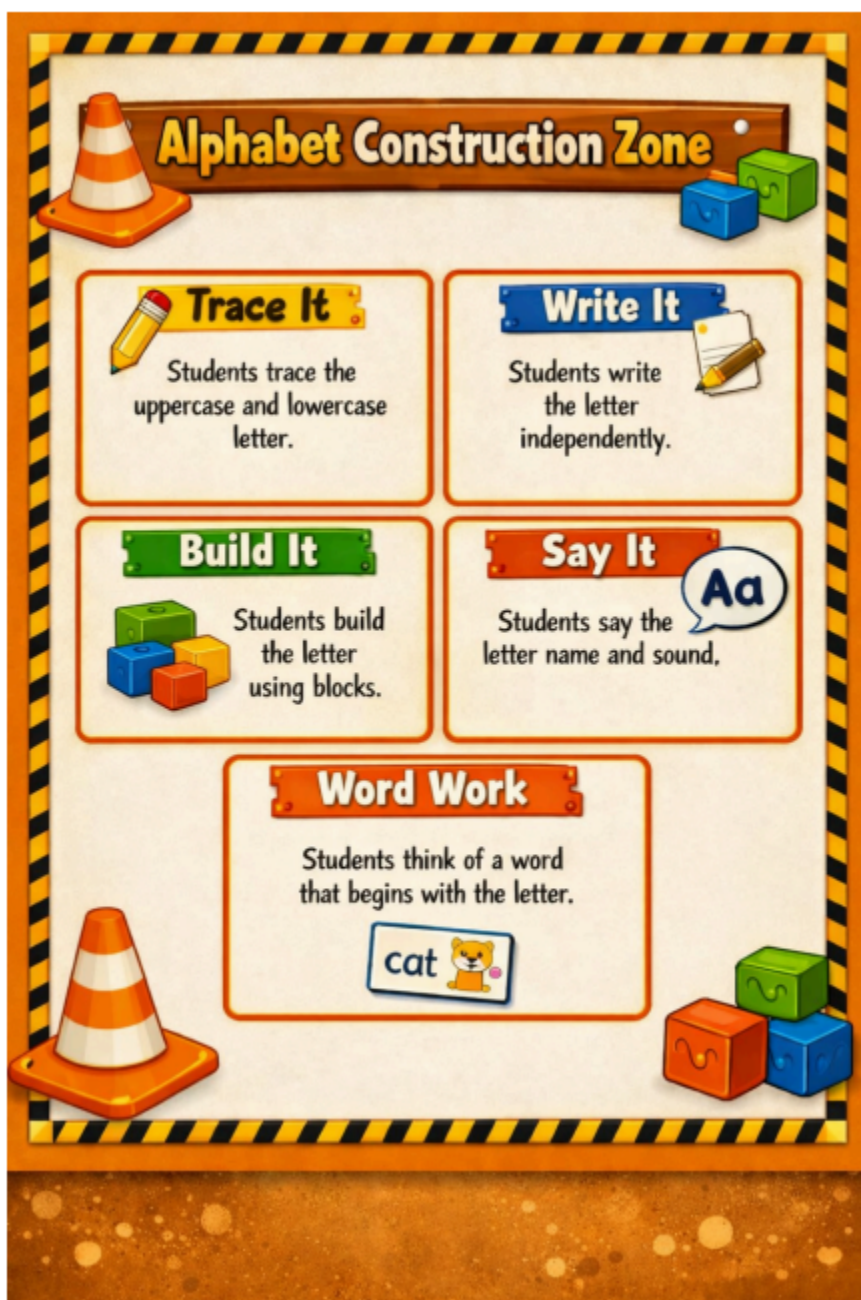
Informal Assessment

- ☐ Demonstrated targeted literacy skill
- ☐ Participated in discussion/play
- ☐ Used literacy materials appropriately
- ☐ Engaged with peers during activity

Teacher Notes: _____

Aligned with research-based play practices (see Appendix A for details).

Figure 2 Continued

Sample Play-Based Activity Download



Alphabet Construction Zone - Trace & Write A-Z



Trace It: _____
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Write It: _____

Build It: _____
 **Build the letters!** 

Say It:  *Say the alphabet sounds!*

Word Work: _____
Draw or write words that start with any letter!
 

Connection to Research

The literacy strategies included in this section reflect research supporting active, experiential literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms. Studies reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated that young children develop literacy understanding through interactive and meaningful experiences grounded in communication, exploration, and play-based participation. This section also reflects research emphasizing oral language development, collaboration, and student engagement as foundational components of literacy learning that occur through play-based experiences rather than isolated instructional activities.

Planning and Classroom Supports

This section provides planning tools and classroom implementation support intended to help educators incorporate play-based literacy practices into daily instruction by designing participatory learning experiences in which literacy develops through play. The framework includes planning guidance, literacy center suggestions, and classroom organization ideas designed to support purposeful and manageable implementation.

Examples of support included in this section are:

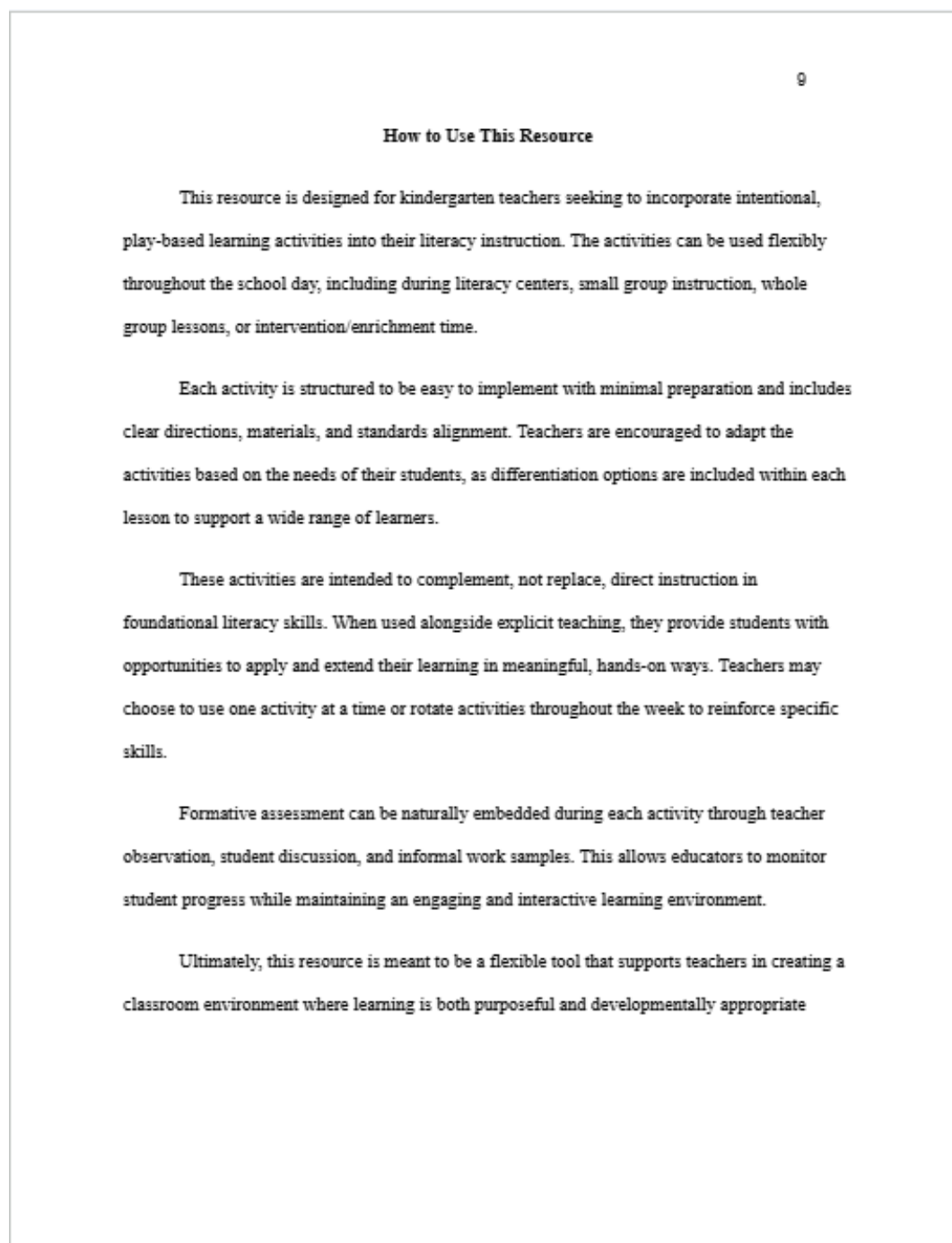
- Literacy activity templates
- Standards alignment guidance
- Suggestions for differentiation

The planning supports were designed to help educators intentionally connect literacy instruction to play-based learning opportunities. This occurs by supporting the design of learning environments where children actively engage in communication, interaction, and meaning-making through play.

As shown in Figure 3, the planning tools provide educators with organized support for instructional decision-making.

Figure 3

Planning and Classroom Support Tools



Connection to Research

Research reviewed in Chapter 2 emphasized the importance of intentional instructional design when creating play-based learning environments. This section reflects literature supporting purposeful planning, differentiated instruction, and literacy-rich classroom environments. The classroom supports also align with developmentally appropriate practice by encouraging flexible, student-centered learning experiences in which children actively participate in meaningful, play-based literacy learning.

Assessment and Reflection Tools

The final section of the framework includes an assessment and reflection tool incorporated with each activity designed to support ongoing instructional decision-making and authentic assessment practices rooted in observation of children's participation in play-based learning experiences. The tool was created to help educators observe and document literacy learning within play-based classroom experiences.

This section includes:

- Observation checklist
- Informal literacy assessment ideas
- Teacher reflection supports

These tools were intentionally designed to support authentic assessment practices appropriate for early childhood classrooms by helping educators notice, document, and respond to children's developing understanding within play-based learning environments.

As shown in Figure 4, the assessment pages provided opportunities for educator reflection and student observation.

Figure 4

Assessment and Reflection Tool

Informal Assessment

- ☐ Demonstrated targeted literacy skill
- ☐ Participated in discussion/play
- ☐ Used literacy materials appropriately
- ☐ Engaged with peers during activity

Teacher Notes: _____

Figure 4 Continued

Assessment and Reflection Tools Download

Alphabet Construction Zone - Informal Assessment

✖ Informal Assesment:

- ☐ Demonstrated targeted literacy skill
- ☐ Participated in discussion/play
- ☐ Used literacy materials appropriately
- ☐ Engaged with peers during activity

Teacher Notes:

Word Work:

Connection to Research

This section reflects research supporting authentic and observational assessment practices in early childhood education. Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 emphasized the importance of assessing student learning through meaningful classroom experiences. This occurs by attending to children's participation in play-based learning contexts, rather than relying solely on formal assessments. The reflection tool also supports ongoing teacher reflection and responsive instructional decision-making. These decisions are based on observations of how children engage, communicate, and make meaning during play-based learning experiences.

Alignment to Standards or Frameworks

The complete guidebook aligns with several professional and instructional systems relevant to kindergarten literacy instruction and early childhood education. The project reflects developmentally appropriate practice guidelines established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These guidelines emphasize active learning, meaningful engagement, collaboration, and child-centered instruction. Together, these elements create conditions in which children's learning develops through participation in play-based experiences.

The framework also aligns with kindergarten literacy standards by describing and supporting key learning processes such as oral language development, phonological awareness, early writing, vocabulary development, and literacy engagement. These skills are understood as emerging through intentional, play-based learning experience.

Additionally, the guidebook reflects instructional practices associated with differentiated instruction, student-centered learning, and social-emotional development. These are seen as interconnected aspects of children's participation in socially interactive classroom environments.

Summary

This chapter presented the completed professional project, a play-based and standards-aligned kindergarten literacy guidebook designed to support early childhood educators in integrating meaningful play opportunities into literacy instruction. This section provided an overview of the framework's purpose, organization, and intended audience before describing each major component of the guidebook, including the framework philosophy, play-based literacy strategies, planning supports, and assessment tools.

The completed project directly addresses the problem identified in Chapter 1 by providing educators with practical strategies for balancing academic expectations with developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten classrooms. The guidebook was intentionally designed to support literacy development while also promoting student engagement, oral language growth, collaboration, and active learning through play-based experiences.

The design of the guidebook was informed by the research reviewed in Chapter 2, including literature related to play-based learning, developmentally appropriate practice, oral language development, literacy engagement, and authentic assessment practices in early childhood education. Additionally, the project development process described in Chapter 3 guided the organization, structure, and refinement of the final product.

Overall, the guidebook was created to serve as a practical and accessible resource for kindergarten educators seeking developmentally appropriate ways to support literacy instruction within standards-driven classrooms. By combining research-based practices with teacher-friendly implementation supports, the project aims to help educators create meaningful literacy experiences that support the developmental and academic needs of young learners.

Chapter 5 will provide reflection and evaluation of the project development process, including strengths, limitations, implications for classroom practice, and recommendations for future implementations and refinement of the framework.

Chapter 5: Reflection

This chapter reflects on the process of designing and developing the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook, a play-based and standards-aligned literacy framework designed to support kindergarten educators in integrating developmentally appropriate practice within academically rigorous classroom environments. A guidebook created to support kindergarten educators in implementing developmentally appropriate instruction within academically rigorous classroom environments. The purpose of this project was to connect standards-based literacy instruction and meaningful play experiences in the classroom by creating a practical, educator-friendly resource that supports young learners academically, socially, and emotionally. Through the creation of this project, I explored how play-based learning could coexist with kindergarten literacy standards in intentional and purposeful ways rather than being viewed as separate from academic instruction.

The creation of this project was deeply connected to both my professional experiences as a kindergarten teacher and my growth as a graduate student in curriculum design and instruction. As academic expectations in early childhood settings continue to increase, I have observed growing pressure to prioritize structured academic tasks over exploratory, child-centered learning experiences. The tension that is present in this context became one of my primary motivations for my project. In my own classroom, I repeatedly saw how students demonstrate stronger engagement, collaboration, oral language development, creativity, and confidence when learning opportunities incorporating play and hands-on interactive experiences. At the same time, I also recognize the challenge educators face in balancing developmentally appropriate practice with accountability to academic standards and curriculum expectations.

Through the research, planning and design process, my understanding of play-based learning became more detailed and intentional. At the beginning of this project, I viewed play primarily as something that needed to be protected within kindergarten classrooms. However, through the literature review and curriculum design process, I began to shift my perspective toward viewing play as a meaningful instructional tool capable of supporting rigorous academic learning when implemented purposefully. This realization significantly shaped the direction of my project and reinforced my belief that academic achievement and joyful learning experiences do not need to exist separately from one another.

This chapter provides an opportunity to reflect on both the strengths and limitations of the completed project as well as the professional growth that occurred throughout the process. In the sections following, I evaluate my progress toward the goals established in Chapter 1, reflect on the influence of the literature review, and examine how the project contributed to my development as an educator, curriculum designer, and advocate for developmentally appropriate practices. Additionally, I share the challenges and limitations that occurred during the project, identify areas for future improvement, and consider how this work may continue to evolve within my own professional practice and future educational settings.

Progress Toward Original Goals

At the beginning of this project, I established several goals centered around creating a practical and developmentally appropriate literacy resource for kindergarten educators. The primary goal of the project was to design a play-based literacy guidebook that supported kindergarten academic standards while also meeting the developmental needs of young learners. More specifically, I hoped to create a resource that teachers could realistically implement within modern kindergarten classrooms where increasing academic expectations often limit

opportunities for exploratory and child-center learning. Within the development of this project, many of these goals were achieved, while others evolved as my understanding of curriculum design, play-based instruction, and educator needs became more refined and complex.

One of my original goals was to create a resource that educators could use independently and flexibly within their own classrooms. I wanted the project to feel practical and accessible rather than overly theoretical. As the project developed, this goal became one of the strongest aspects of the completed guidebook. The guidebook includes literacy activities, instructional supports, assessment ideas, and differentiation opportunities that educators can adapt based on the needs of their students and classroom environments. Instead of designing a strict curriculum that required perfect implementation, I ultimately created a flexible guidebook that allows educators to incorporate play-based learning in ways that align with their instructional style, pacing, and student needs. This shift from creating a full curriculum to designing a teacher-friendly guidebook represented an important evolution in this project. Through the design process, I realized that flexibility and adaptability were essential if the resource was going to be realistic and sustainable for practicing teachers.

Another major goal of the project was to demonstrate that play-based learning and standards-aligned instruction can coexist within kindergarten classrooms. At the beginning of this project I was motivated by concerns that play was increasingly being removed from early childhood education due to academic pressures and accountability measures. I hoped to create a project that challenged that misconception that play and academic rigor are opposites. Throughout the creation of the guidebook, I intentionally designed activities that integrate literacy standards with hands-on learning, oral language development, movement, collaboration, and student engagement. The completed project reflects these goals by sharing how literacy

instruction can remain academically meaningful while also being developmentally appropriate and engaging for young children. In many ways, this goal became even more central to the project as I progressed through the research and writing process.

A third goal was to support student engagement and meaningful learning experiences through developmentally appropriate instructional practices. In my experiences as a kindergarten teacher, I have consistently observed that students learn best when they are actively involved in their learning through play, exploration, and social interaction. As I developed the activities and instructional components of the guidebook, I focused on creating opportunities for students to engage with literacy concepts in interactive and purposeful ways. Many of the activities encourage communication, creativity, collaboration, and movement while still addressing foundational literacy skills. I believe the finished project successfully reflects my commitment to creating engaging learning experiences that support the whole child rather than focusing exclusively on isolated academic skill development.

Many of the original goals were met, but some aspects of the project evolved significantly throughout the process. Initially, I envisioned creating a larger and more comprehensive curriculum resource that addressed multiple academic subjects in kindergarten. However, as the project progressed, I recognized the importance of narrowing the scope to create a more focused, manageable, and meaningful final product. The project ultimately centered more specifically on literacy instruction and play-based literacy experiences rather than attempting to address all areas of kindergarten curriculum. While this narrowed focus limited the scope of the project, it also strengthened the quality and clarity of the final guidebook.

Additionally, my understanding of assessment evolved throughout the design process. Early in the project, I focused primarily on activity design and instructional engagement.

However, as I continued developing the guidebook, I recognized that effective play-based instruction also requires intentional opportunities for observation, documentation, and assessment. This realization led me to incorporate simple assessment ideas and a reflective component within the activities themselves. Although assessment was not initially one of the most prominent aspects of this project, it became an important area of growth and development as the guidebook evolved.

Overall, I believe the project successfully met its central purpose of creating a standards-aligned, play-based literacy guidebook that supports developmentally appropriate kindergarten instruction. More importantly, the process of completing the project helped me refine my own understanding of curriculum design, instructional intentionality, and the role of play within academic learning environments. While some goals changed through the process, those changes strengthened the final product and reflected professional growth.

Connection to the Literature Review

The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 played a significant role in shaping both the direction and the design of the project. Through the research process, I gained a deeper understanding of the relationship between play-based learning, early literacy development, and developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten classrooms. Many of the ideas explored in the literature aligned with observations I had already made in my own classroom experience. The research process challenged me to think more intentionally about how play can be a purposeful instructional tool rather than an opportunity for free exploration or student enjoyment. The literature helped strengthen the theoretical foundation of the project while also increasing my confidence in advocating for play-based learning within academically rigorous educational settings.

One of the most persuasive themes throughout the literature review was the importance of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education. Research consistently emphasized that young children learn best through active, hands-on, and interactive experiences that align with their developmental needs. The research strongly reinforced my own beliefs about kindergarten instruction and became a central guiding principle throughout the design of the guidebook. Rather than play and academics as being seen as separate instructional approaches, the literature encouraged me to think more deeply about how purposeful play experiences can support academic growth while also promoting social-emotional development, communication skills, creativity, and student engagement.

Research related to early literacy development was particularly important in shaping the structure of the guidebook activities. Studies highlight the importance of oral language, interactive learning experiences, and student engagement. The findings reinforced my decision to create literacy activities that encouraged collaboration, movement, conversation, and exploration. Before completing the literature review, I already believed that students were more engaged during hands-in and play-based learning experiences. However, the research helped me better understand why these experiences are effective and how they contribute to literacy development beyond isolated skill practice. This understanding allowed me to design activities with greater intentionality and clearer instructional purpose.

The literature review also deepened my understanding of the increasing academic pressure placed on kindergarten classrooms and the resulting reduction of play opportunities within early childhood education. Multiple sources shared the change toward more rigorous academic expectations and the tension educators often experience when trying to balance standards-based instruction with developmentally appropriate practices. This research strongly

connected to my own experiences as a kindergarten teacher and became one of the main motivations behind the project. Reading about these national trends validated many of the concerns I had already observed within my own educational setting. At the same time, the literature provided reassurance that play-based learning continues to hold high educational value despite the increasing accountability tension.

One of the most meaningful realizations that came from the literature review was the understanding that play-based instruction requires intentional planning and structure in order to effectively support academic learning. Before beginning this project, I often saw play primarily as an opportunity for creativity, exploration, and student engagement. While I still value those aspects of play, the research challenged me to think more critically about the role of teacher intentionality within play-based environments. This change in thinking directly influenced the design of the guidebook, leading me to incorporate clearer literacy objectives, scaffolding strategies, and assessment opportunities throughout the activities. The project became more purposeful and academically aligned because of the deeper understanding gained through the research process.

Additionally, the literature review influenced the overall organization and accessibility of the guidebook itself. Research highlighted educator support, instructional flexibility, and differentiation and encouraged me to create a resource that educators could realistically use in their own classroom with their students. Rather than creating a highly rigid curriculum, I focused on developing a flexible framework that could support a variety of teaching styles, classroom structures, and learner needs. This decision reflected both the findings within the literature and my own experiences working within diverse classroom environments.

The literature largely reinforced my beliefs about the value of play-based learning, it also expanded my perspective in important ways. Prior to conducting the research, I primarily saw play as something that should remain present in kindergarten because it supports child development and student happiness. Through the literature review process, I came to understand more fully that play-based instruction can also serve as an effective tool for rigorous academic learning when designed intentionally. This change in perspective strengthened both the theoretical and practical foundation of the project and ultimately changed how I think about instructional design within early childhood classrooms.

Overall, the literature review served as both a source of validation and a catalyst for professional growth throughout this project. The research confirmed many of the instructional practices I valued as an educator while also challenging me to approach curriculum design with greater intentionality, structure, and purpose. The completed project reflects the integration of both research-based practices and classroom experience, demonstrating how play-based learning can support meaningful literacy development within standards-aligned kindergarten instruction.

Personal and Professional Growth

The process of completing this professional project contributed significantly to my growth as an educator, curriculum designer, researcher, and reflective practitioner. Through the development of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook, I gained a better understanding of both my own teaching philosophy and the intentional work required to design meaningful, standards-aligned instruction for young learners. While the completed project represents a tangible instructional resource, the process itself was valuable because it challenged me to reflect critically on my instructional practices, professional goals, and beliefs about early childhood education.

One of the most important areas of growth through this project was the development of greater confidence in my own educational philosophy and professional voice. As a kindergarten teacher, I have always believed in the value of play, exploration, movement, and hands-on learning experiences for young children. Prior to this project, I sometimes struggled with how to fully defend or articulate the academic importance of play-based instruction within increasingly standards-driven educational environments. Through the literature review and curriculum design process, I developed a stronger understanding of the research supporting developmentally appropriate practice and early childhood learning. This understanding strengthened my confidence as an educator and reinforced my belief that play and academic rigor can coexist in meaningful and intentional ways.

Throughout the project, I continued to grow in curriculum design and instructional planning skills. Before beginning this work, I often approached lesson planning from the perspective of immediate classroom implementation and daily instructional needs. This project required me to think more broadly and strategically about instructional design, alignment, assessment, scaffolding, differentiation, and long-term organization. I learned how to create instructional materials that engaged students and intentionally connected to standards, learning objectives, and developmental needs. The process helped me move beyond simply creating activities to designing cohesive learning experiences with clear educational purpose and structure.

Another significant area of growth involved understanding the importance of intentionality within play-based instruction. Before this project, I saw play primarily as a valuable opportunity for engagement, creativity, and social interaction. While those aspects remain important, the research and design process challenged me to think more critically about

how educators intentionally structure play experiences as contexts for literacy learning and meaning-making. As I developed the guidebook activities, I became more thoughtful about incorporating literacy objectives, opportunities for assessment, scaffolding supports, and differentiation strategies within playful learning experiences. This change in thinking has already affected my instructional planning and classroom practices in meaningful ways.

Beyond professional growth as an educator, this project has strengthened my skills as a researcher and graduate-level learner. Performing a literature review required me to analyze educational research more deeply than I had in previous academic experiences. I learned how to identify meaningful themes across sources, connect theory to practice, and critically evaluate research content within the context of my own classroom experiences. This process helped me become a more reflective and informed educator who is better equipped to use research to guide instructional decision-making.

This project also taught me valuable lessons about organization, time management, perseverance, and balancing multiple professional responsibilities. Completing a large-scale graduate project while simultaneously teaching kindergarten full time was both rewarding and difficult. Navigating these challenges helped me create stronger project management skills and a greater appreciation for the persistence required to complete long-term professional work.

Another important area of personal growth involved learning to embrace revision and flexibility throughout the design process. Initially, I started the project with a fairly set vision of what the final product would look like. However, as the project evolved, I realized that meaningful curriculum design often requires continuous reflection, revision, and adaptation. The guidebook was adjusted several times throughout the process as I refined the purpose, narrowed the scope, included assessment ideas, and considered educator usability. Learning to see

revisions as part of growth rather than failure was an important professional lesson that will continue to influence my future work as an educator and curriculum designer.

This project also strengthened my identity as an educator who advocates for developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education. Through both the research and reflection process, I became increasingly aware of the tension many kindergarten educators experience between meeting academic expectations and maintaining meaningful learning experiences for young children. Developing this guidebook reinforced my commitment to creating a classroom where students feel engaged, capable, curious, and joyful while still participating in rigorous academic learning. I now feel more prepared to advocate for instructional practices that support the whole child and to engage in professional conversations about the importance of play within early childhood settings.

Overall, completing this professional project changed the way I think about instruction, curriculum design, and my role as an educator. I began this process primarily as a classroom teacher searching for practical ways to integrate play into literacy instruction. I completed the project with a deeper understanding of educational research, instructional intentionality, and curriculum development. More importantly, the experience strengthened my confidence in my ability to design meaningful learning experiences that support both academic achievement and child development. The knowledge, skills, and professional growth gained throughout this project will continue to influence my teaching practice and future professional work long after completion of this degree program.

Alignment with Professional Standards

The development and completion of this professional project aligned closely with the learning outcomes of the Master of Science in Education program. Throughout the process of

designing the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook, I strengthened my understanding of curriculum design, standards-based instruction, research-informed practice, assessment, and professional leadership within early childhood education. The project not only reflected the application of these professional standards, but also contributed significantly to my personal and professional growth as an educator.

One of the primary MSED learning outcomes focuses on effectively applying the professional content expertise, knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the education profession. This project directly supported that outcome through the creation of a standards-aligned, play-based literacy guidebook designed specifically for kindergarten learners. Throughout the design process, I applied my knowledge of early literacy instruction, child development, curriculum planning, differentiation, and developmentally appropriate practice. The guidebook reflects intentional instructional design that balances academic standards with meaningful, engaging learning experiences appropriate for young children. As I developed the activities and instructional support within the guidebook, I strengthened my ability to connect educational theory, classroom practice, and curriculum development in purposeful ways.

Another important learning outcome within the MSED program emphasizes the use of research and evidence to develop environments that support and assess learning as well as professional practice. This project required considerable engagement with educational research related to play-based learning, early literacy development, and developmentally appropriate instruction. Through the literature review process, I learned how to analyze research, identify meaningful themes, and apply evidence-based practices to curriculum design. The research greatly influenced both the structure and intentionality of the guidebook. Additionally, the project strengthened my understanding of assessment within play-based environments. As the

guidebook evolved, I incorporated opportunities for authentic assessment, teacher observation, reflection, and student interaction to support learning in developmentally appropriate ways. This process helped me recognize the importance of using research and evidence not only to design instruction, but also to evaluate student learning and improve professional practice.

The project also aligned well with the MSED learning outcome related to demonstrating commitment to professional leadership attributes. Through the design of this guidebook, I strengthened my role as both an educator and an advocate for developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education. The project was designed to address a meaningful challenge within kindergarten classrooms: balancing increasing academic expectations with the developmental needs of young learners. By designing a practical and research-informed guidebook, I worked to contribute positively to professional conversations around play-based learning and standards-aligned instruction. The process also strengthened my confidence in collaboration with other educators, engaging in reflective practice, and contributing ideas that support meaningful instructional improvement within early childhood settings.

Furthermore, the project helped me grow as a reflective educator and lifelong learner. Throughout the research, writing, revision, and design process, I continually evaluated my own instructional beliefs, teaching practices, and curriculum decisions. I learned to approach curriculum design more intentionally and thoughtfully while recognizing the importance of flexibility, revision, and ongoing professional growth. Completing this project while teaching full time also helped grow my perseverance, organization, and ability to balance multiple professional responsibilities effectively.

Overall, the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook reflected meaningful alignment with the goals and learning outcomes of the Master of Science in Education program. More

importantly, the process of completing the project strengthened my professional knowledge, instructional decision-making, research skills, leadership abilities, and confidence as an educator. Through the experience, I developed a deeper understanding of how research, curriculum design, reflective practice, and developmentally appropriate instruction work together to support meaningful learning for young children.

Limitations and Challenges

The development of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook was a meaningful and valuable professional experience, however, several limitations and challenges emerged throughout the process. These challenges helped shape the final design of the project and also contributed to my growth as a curriculum designer and reflective educator.

One of the main challenges involved balancing developmentally appropriate, play-based instruction with the increasing academic expectations present in today's kindergarten classrooms. The goal of the project was to integrate play with standards-based literacy instruction; it became clear that time constraints within the school day can limit the depth and frequency of play-based learning experiences. Even when instruction is intentionally designed, real-world constraints such as scheduling, pacing guides, and curriculum demands can impact how play-based approaches are implemented in real classroom settings.

Another limitation of this project was the scope of implementation. The guidebook was designed and adjusted within the context of my own classroom experiences and professional observations. As a result, the guidebook has not been formally tested or implemented across multiple classrooms, grade levels, or school settings. Because classroom environments, diverse students, and instructional expectations can vary widely, the effectiveness and adaptability of the

guidebook may change depending on setting. Broader implementation would be needed to fully evaluate its impact across diverse educational environments.

Integration of assessment within play-based learning was another challenge involved in the creation of the guidebook. In the beginning of the development process, the focus was primarily on designing engaging, hands-on literacy activities. However, as the project grew, it became increasingly important to consider how student learning could be observed and documented within play-based environments. Traditional assessment systems do not always capture the depth of learning that occurs during play, requiring a change to more authentic, observational, and formative assessment methods. Designing meaningful assessment methods that aligned with both standards and play-based instruction required additional reflection and revision throughout the project.

Time-management was also a significant challenge during completion of this project. As a full-time kindergarten teacher and graduate student, balancing daily instructional responsibilities with the demands of research, writing, and curriculum design required continual organization and flexibility. At times, this resulted in adjustments to the original timeline and a need to streamline certain aspects of the guidebook. While this limitation was challenging, it ultimately contributed to a more realistic and practical final product that is formed in the realities of classroom teaching.

Additionally, narrowing the scope of the project presented both a challenge and a necessary decision. First, I considered developing a broader curriculum resource that addressed multiple subject areas in kindergarten. However, as the project continued, it became clear that focusing specifically on literacy allowed for more thoughtfulness, precision, and purpose.

Through limiting the scope of the project, it strengthened the overall quality and usability of the guidebook.

Despite the limitations, each challenge contributed to the development of a more thoughtful, practical, and classroom-ready resource. The process reinforced the importance of flexibility, reflection, and realistic curriculum design within early childhood education. Rather than weakening the project, these limitations helped clarify its purpose and strengthen its alignment with authentic classroom practice.

Improvements and Future Directions

The *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook represents a meaningful and intentional integration of play-based learning and standards-aligned literacy instruction. While the guidebook has several strengths, there are also areas where the project could be further strengthened through continued development. These improvements primarily center on broader implementation, greater assessment development, and continued alignment with changing practices in early childhood education.

One specific area for future improvement is expanded implementation across diverse classroom settings. At this stage, the guidebook has been developed and informed primarily through my own classroom experiences and professional practice. In the future, implementation in additional classrooms would provide valuable feedback regarding its usability, adaptability, and effectiveness. Feedback from other educators could help identify areas that require clarification, adjustment, or additional support, ultimately improving the practicality of the guidebook for a larger audience.

Another form of improvement involves the continued development of assessment strategies in play-based learning environments. The current guidebook includes observational

and informal assessment suggestions; however, future refinements and expansion of assessment tools could strengthen data collection and instructional decision-making. Future revisions could include more structured observation checklists, documentation templates, and examples of student learning data collected during play. Strengthening the assessment aspect would help educators more effectively connect play-based experiences to literacy standards and learning outcomes while implementing developmentally appropriate practice.

Future revisions of the guidebook could include more explicit guidance for differentiation and support for diverse learners. The current guidebook includes flexibility, additional examples could further support multilingual learners, students with IEP's, and those requiring enrichment or additional scaffolding. Expanding differentiation strategies would increase accessibility and support educators in meeting the needs of diverse learners so they can more fully access intentionally designed play-based environments.

A potential next step to expand the guidebook to include more content beyond literacy such as math, science, or inclusion of thematic units. While limiting focus to literacy strengthened the clarity and depth of this project, future work could include a more comprehensive play-based curriculum resource. Moving into other subject areas would further clarify how play-based learning can support development across all domains of early childhood education.

Finally, continued collaboration and feedback would be an important step in the growth of the project. Collaboration with other educators, instructional coaches, and early childhood specialists could provide new perspectives and ideas for clarity. Collaboration would also greatly develop the shared understanding around the inclusion of play-based learning within standards-driven environments and developmentally appropriate practice.

Overall, the continued development of this project focuses on refinement, expansion, and collaboration. The foundation of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook provides a strong beginning, and continued development has the potential to further grow its impact, usability, and relevance within early childhood education settings.

Conclusion

The completion of the *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook represents both a professional accomplishment and a meaningful reflection of my growth as an educator and curriculum designer. The purpose of this project was to create a practical, standards-aligned literacy guidebook that intentionally integrated play-based learning into kindergarten instruction. Through the process, I looked to address the ongoing challenge of balancing developmentally appropriate practice with increasing academic expectations in early childhood education.

Through the creation of this project, I gained a better understanding of how purposeful play can serve as an effective and meaningful instructional approach for supporting early literacy development. What began as a desire to preserve play in the kindergarten classroom evolved into a more complex understanding of play as an intentional, research-supported instructional strategy for teaching academic skills. This change in perspective strengthened both the design of the guidebook and my own instructional philosophy.

The process of creating this project provided significant opportunities for professional growth. I grew my skills in curriculum design, instructional planning, assessment development, and reflective practice. Additionally, I developed a greater appreciation for the role of research in informing instructional decisions and the importance of aligning educational practice with both academic standards and developmental needs. Working through the challenges of time

management, scope clarification, and assessment design further reinforced the importance of flexibility and adaptability in professional practice.

This project reaffirmed my commitment to creating learning environments where young children are engaged, supported, and valued as capable learners. It strengthened my belief that academic learning and joyful, play-based experiences are not mutually exclusive, but complementary when designed thoughtfully. As an educator, I am now confident in my ability to advocate for developmentally appropriate practice and to design instruction that supports the whole student.

The *Kindergarten Through Play* guidebook is both a practical instructional resource and a reflection of my journey as a graduate student and educator. The knowledge and skills gained through this process will continue to influence my teaching practice and professional decision-making moving forward. I will take this experience with me as I continue to grow as an educator committed to meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning for all students.

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