The Challenges of Promoting Literacy Integration within a Play-based Learning Kindergarten Program: Teacher Perspectives and Implementation

Angela Pyle, Daniel Poliszczuk and Erica Danniels

Version       Post-print/Accepted Manuscript


Publisher's Statement This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the Journal of Research and Child Education on January 19th 2018, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02568543.2017.1416006

How to cite TSpace items

Always cite the published version, so the author(s) will receive recognition through services that track citation counts, e.g. Scopus. If you need to cite the page number of the author manuscript from TSpace because you cannot access the published version in addition to the published version using the permanent URI (handle) found on the record page.

This article was made openly accessible by U of T Faculty. Please tell us how this access benefits you. Your story matters.
The Challenges of Promoting Literacy Integration within a Play-based Learning Kindergarten Program: Teacher Perspectives and Implementation

Abstract

Kindergarten teachers face the challenge of balancing traditional developmental programming and contemporary academic standards. In classrooms following a play-based learning framework, academic content such as literacy is to be taught within children’s play. However, educators have reported both conceptual and practical challenges with integrating play and literacy. Although the educative contexts of direct instruction, teacher-guided play, and child-directed free play have been individually examined and endorsed for promoting early literacy, the enactment of literacy behaviours across these contexts in kindergarten has not been widely examined. The current study investigated teacher perspectives on play and literacy development and the resulting integration of literacy behaviours across educative contexts. Semi-structured teacher interviews and video data were collected in 12 participating classrooms. Results revealed three common challenges with integrating play and literacy learning: direct instruction plays a key instructional role, play is less structured and difficult to plan, and feeling uncertain how to implement guided play. These challenges were reflected in the differing frequencies of literacy behaviours observed across contexts. These results point to the need for additional research and teacher training with respect to implementing guided play for literacy learning, as well as strategies for balancing direct instruction with play-based approaches.

Keywords

play; kindergarten; literacy; pedagogy; teacher perspectives
Introduction

There is compelling evidence that children’s play has an important role in the development of language and literacy during the early years (Roskos & Christie, 2013). Accordingly, some early learning curricula have positioned play as a foundational context for academic learning (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016). However, research examining teacher perspectives and practices while enacting play-based learning curricula have uncovered some challenges with respect to integrating play and literacy learning (e.g., Baker, 2014; Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004). Although some educators endorse play as a vehicle for learning, many continue to utilize primarily direct instruction methods for teaching early academic skills, with varying possible reasons for this discrepancy suggested by researchers (Foote, Smith, & Ellis, 2004; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009). A range of educative contexts commonly observed in play-based kindergarten have been shown in the literature to demonstrate efficacy for literacy learning; namely, direct teacher instruction, teacher-guided play, and child-directed free play (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). However, the use of these different contexts to support literacy learning in naturalistic classroom settings has not been widely examined. Insights about the occurrence of literacy behaviours across these educative contexts, alongside teacher perspectives on the benefits and/or challenges of each context for literacy learning, can help to illuminate factors influencing teachers’ pedagogical decisions within the mandated play-based learning framework. The current study investigated teacher perspectives on the integration of literacy learning in play-based kindergarten, alongside observed classroom practices with respect to the enactment of a range of literacy behaviours within three educative contexts: direct instruction, guided play, and free play.
Literature Review

Play-Based Learning

Kindergarten education has endured significant curricular changes in recent years, including a shift towards incorporating more prescriptive academic standards (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006) as well as a shift towards the promotion of play-based learning pedagogy (Synodi, 2010). Historically, children’s play has occupied an important role in the kindergarten classroom as traditional conceptions emphasized the importance of teachers nurturing children’s early personal and social development through student-centered activities and allowing children to develop at their own pace (Manning, 2005). Literacy skills were often targeted more formally through direct instruction or immersion in literacy tasks in the primary grades (Pressley et al., 1998). However, in more recent decades, movements towards prescribed academic standards and accountability in education have resulted in an increase in formal literacy expectations at the kindergarten level (Miller & Almon, 2009). While historically play and learning have been viewed as separate endeavours (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006), educators are now faced with the task of integrating academics and play in order to meet current curricular mandates (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016). A growing body of research has provided both theoretical and empirical evidence for the use of play-based learning strategies to support areas of development and learning, including social competence (Binder, 2014), self-regulation abilities (De La Riva & Ryan, 2015), mathematics (Casey et al., 2008), and literacy skills (Sharp, Escalante, & Anderson, 2012). Research has demonstrated that students in classrooms utilizing play-based pedagogies have outperformed students in classrooms primarily utilizing direct instruction in numeracy (Presser, Clements, Ginsburg, & Ertle, 2015), literacy (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013), and general cognitive outcomes (Walsh et al., 2006). However, a
lack of agreement is evident among researchers regarding the types of play-based learning endorsed and the optimal role of the teacher in play (Pyle, DeLuca, & Danniels, 2017).

Recent qualitative research has revealed varying perspectives and interpretations of play-based learning among educators in the kindergarten classroom. While some teachers have been found to endorse the concept of learning through play and advocate for adult involvement in children’s play, others have communicated challenges with integrating play with academic learning and conceptualize play as a purely child-directed endeavour (Pui-Wah, 2008; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Furthermore, many practical challenges with implementing play-based learning have been reported, including a lack of training (Howard, 2010), pressure to ensure children attain high academic standards (Leggett & Ford, 2013), large teacher-child ratios (Lynch, 2014), and a lack of time and space to support play (Hegde & Cassidy, 2009). Demands for students to achieve higher academic learning outcomes have not been matched with pedagogical support to help teachers incorporate these goals into the context of kindergarten education (Fleer, 2010). As a result, both conceptual and practical challenges have been uncovered in the shift towards following a mandated play-based learning framework. These challenges are concerning in light of the important early learning outcomes outlined to be targeted through play in the kindergarten years, including the development of key literacy and pre-literacy skills.

**Early Literacy**

The learning that occurs during kindergarten has a significant impact on later academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007; McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). It marks an important academic period that starts to bridge emergent literacy, which includes phonological processing (Wagner and Torgesen, 1987) and vocabulary skills (Biemiller, 2003), to formal academic skills such as decoding (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn, Adler, & Noonis, 2010; Solari et
Challenges of Literacy & Play

al., 2014). In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) identified several core literacy skills as essential for the acquisition of reading ability including alphabetic, fluency, and text comprehension (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). The category of alphabetic includes both phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that language is a composition of constituent parts that can be broken down and manipulated (NRP, 2000), and is a strong early predictor of later reading ability (Stahl and Murray, 1994). Alphabet knowledge involves learning the names and sounds associated with different letters.

Fluency is generally regarded as the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and expression (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). Students learn to develop reading fluency through acquiring decoding skills that support independent reading (Vadasys, Sanders, & Peyton, 2006) and developing automaticity in their word reading ability (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Finally, comprehension involves the dual processes of vocabulary growth and narrative reasoning (NRP, 2000). Vocabulary growth in particular has been strongly associated with reading achievement (Biemiller, 2003). All of these skills have been shown to emerge through everyday activities and interactions (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006), but often also require more direct instruction, particularly for students with weaker literacy ability (Botts, Losardo, Tillery, & Werts, 2012). Within play-based classrooms, navigating the balance between scaffolding academic knowledge and skills in child-directed contexts (i.e., play) and teacher-directed instruction often produces tensions about how to best foster literacy skills (Saracho, 2012). It is not yet well known how these key literacy behaviours are being practiced within different educative contexts in play-based kindergarten classrooms.

Classroom Learning Contexts
**Direct instruction.** Children’s learning of curricular content can occur in several distinct classroom contexts, the prevalence of which is often based on the pedagogical philosophy of the educator and the legislative jurisdiction of the school board (Beatty, 2011; Stipek and Byler, 1997; Synodi, 2010). One of the most universal approaches to pedagogy in kindergarten is the direct instruction of academic content, which is characterized by lessons that are both highly structured and teacher-directed. Direct instruction is often considered to be a didactic instructional mode in which teachers explicitly transmit academic content at a pace that they themselves set, typically followed by guided or independent work by students (Drake, Kolohon, & Reid, 2014; Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009). Examples of direct instruction in kindergarten are whole class lessons (such as circle time) and small group lessons, in which the teacher introduces content and coordinates the activity. It has been demonstrated to be an effective teaching pedagogy for literacy particularly for children with academic difficulties or lower SES (Beck and McKeown, 2007; Gersten, Darch, & Gleason, 1988). While direct instruction is prevalent in North American kindergarten classrooms (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016), criticisms about the developmental appropriateness of highly structured kindergarten programs have led some educators and policy-makers towards more child-centered pedagogies, such as play-based learning. This movement towards play-based learning is supported by research into the efficacy of play as a valid learning context for curricular content (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

**Free play.** Unlike direct instruction, a play-based pedagogy provides more opportunities for children to lead their own learning through play. This context encourages learning through playful exploration, experimentation, and peer interaction (Van Oers and Duijkers, 2013). There is wide acknowledgement that free play, or play that is freely chosen and child-directed (e.g.,
Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, & Golinkoff, 2013), can be an effective means of fostering a range of developmental competencies such as personal skills, self-regulation (Elias and Berk, 2002), and social skills (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2006), as well as abilities that support academic learning, such as oral language development (Saracho, 2012). When free play is used as a classroom learning context, it allows students to independently select and explore activities that can promote learning, and engage with curricular content at their own pace (Walsh et al., 2006). Early learning programs and curricula that emphasize play as a foundation for learning have demonstrated promising outcomes in multiple domains (e.g. Blair and Raver, 2015), including language and literacy development (Stagnitti, Bailey, Stevenson, Reynolds, & Kidd, 2015). In contrast to classroom environments that rely heavily on teacher directed literacy instruction, there is support for the assertion that these skills can be taught effectively through play scenarios (Weisberg et al., 2013). Van Oers and Duijkers’ (2013) study compared classroom environments in which teachers engaged in direct instruction for literacy to classrooms in which teachers relied on setting up play environments for students that contained material that promoted the integration of targeted skills. The findings demonstrated that this approach resulted in greater acquisition of new words than classrooms with direct instruction (Van Oers and Duijkers, 2013). Furthermore, the use of play-based settings has been found to strengthen children’s literacy development by offering the opportunity for children to engage and share knowledge amongst peers (Vukelich, 1993), thus effectively increasing the number of available sources of information for each student within the classroom.

**Guided play.** When the educator leads the learning, it is often based on specific predetermined curricular learning goals. However, teachers can also integrate purposeful and directed learning within children’s play activities by taking an active role in the play, an
instructional strategy often referred to as guided play (Weisberg et al., 2013). During guided play, the educator can engage in a variety of practices to embed or scaffold academic learning within children’s play activities such as providing comments or questions, becoming an active co-player, or leading games and activities that address curricular content in a playful manner (Fisher et al., 2013; Jones & Reynolds, 2011). While free play is emphasized as a primarily child-directed endeavour, guided play emphasizes the importance of active educator involvement in order to embed or extend academic content within children’s play activities. Guided play can be an effective strategy for fostering literacy in young children. For example, a study by Han et al. (2010) examining the efficacy of a targeted vocabulary instructional protocol found that kindergarten-aged children engaged in cooperative play with an adult demonstrated enhanced vocabulary learning over those who only received direct instruction. The authors attributed these gains to the ability of the playful context to motivate children to engage with the academic content (Han et al., 2010). However, the authors also acknowledged that more research into how guided play supports learning in naturalistic classrooms is required to better understand the processes of student learning in kindergarten.

Teacher Perspectives

Several factors that have been found to influence the implementation of play-based learning stem from teachers’ reported perspectives and challenges with integrating play and learning in the classroom (e.g., Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In a recent scoping review of research addressing play-based learning in kindergarten (Pyle, DeLuca, & Danniels, 2017), studies that examined teacher perspectives and practices while implementing play-based learning curricula revealed some common themes, including reported difficulties with integrating the concepts of play and learning (e.g., Vong, 2012), endorsing the concept of learning through play but
primarily implementing direct instruction (e.g., Hegde & Cassidy, 2009), and citing practical barriers to the implementation of play-based learning strategies (e.g., Hu, Fuentes, Wang, & Ye, 2014). Teachers who have reported challenges with integrating the often dichotomously viewed concepts of play and learning have been found to focus primarily on implementing direct instruction and free play in their classrooms, while teachers who endorsed the view that literacy learning can be accomplished through play have been found to implement more guided play alongside free play and direct instruction (Pyle, Prioretta, & Poliszczuk, 2017). Teachers’ understandings of the relationship between play and literacy learning was thus found to be related to their subsequent implementation of play-based pedagogy. However, other studies have found that while educators in several countries endorsed children’s ability to learn through play, they continued to primarily utilize methods of direct instruction to address academic learning (e.g., Kim, 2004; Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004). Some potential reasons for this discrepancy put forth by researchers included teachers’ underlying beliefs regarding the importance of direct instruction, pressure to meet accountability requirements, past teacher training experiences, following routine practices, or social desirability bias towards endorsing play as pedagogy (Foote et al., 2004; Hedge & Cassidy, 2009). Lastly, teachers have reported practical challenges in implementing play-based pedagogy, such as a lack of professional development or training in play and pressure from parents and/or administration to achieve prescribed academic outcomes (Howard, 2010; Leggett & Ford, 2013). These practical challenges were reported by teachers as influencing the pedagogical decision to implement more direct instruction and resulted in fewer opportunities for play-based learning.

Objective
While these three early learning contexts (direct instruction, guided play, and free play) have been examined separately with each demonstrating a capacity for fostering literacy learning (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Han et al., 2010; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013), it is not yet clear how each context uniquely contributes to the practice of literacy skills in play-based kindergarten classrooms. The purpose of the current study was to examine teacher perspectives on literacy development and play-based learning, and examine the resulting integration of key early literacy behaviours within direct instruction, guided play, and free play contexts in kindergarten classrooms. This examination of both teacher perspectives and observed literacy practices will illuminate factors influencing teachers’ pedagogical decisions for early literacy learning in play-based kindergarten.

Method

Study Context

Ethical approval was granted by the University and two school district ethical review committees. One of the school districts was located in a suburban area, and the other in an urban area. Consent was provided by twelve kindergarten teachers to collect data in their classrooms in a metropolitan district in Ontario, Canada. While schools were embedded within two distinct school districts, every teacher used the same provincially mandated kindergarten program as a basis for instruction. This setting was a natural context for this research as changes to the kindergarten curriculum initiated in 2010 created a program based on principles of play-based learning (OME, 2010). The updated program was intended to give children the opportunity to experience a full day of enriching, play-based learning in a setting that encourages curiosity and promotes learning in core academic areas (OME, 2016). Using a pedagogical paradigm of developmentally appropriate practice at its core, the curriculum positions children’s play as an
essential context for learning and development (OME, 2010), and accordingly, the mandate of the ministry requires educators to teach academic skills through play, under the provision of play-based learning (OME, 2016). Based on this premise, all academic strands, including language and literacy, are taught and assessed through the paradigm of children’s play.

Participants and Data Sources

Twelve kindergarten teachers with between 3 and 26 years of experience ($M = 11.75$ years) participated in the study. Half reported receiving some type of training on the role of play in the kindergarten classroom: four teachers reported participating in one or more workshops on play-based learning, and two independently sought out and completed online courses on the subject of play. Five teachers stated that they had received no prior training in play, and one did not share any information about prior professional development about play-based learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participating teacher. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview questions focused on the teachers’ perspectives regarding the role of play in children’s learning (i.e., What aspects of student learning are enhanced by engaging in play?), the teacher’s role in play (i.e., How do you support student learning during play?), and the relationship between play and literacy learning (i.e., What is the role of play in developing literacy skills?).

Active parental consent and student assent to participate in the research were received from a total of 175 students across the twelve classrooms. A minimum of 10 hours of observational data within each participating classroom were collected, including video recorded observations of periods of literacy-focused teacher-directed instruction, children’s self-directed play, and periods where teachers participated in children’s play. The definition of play utilized by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) was followed, whereby play was defined as “child-
initiated free play and more structured play-based learning opportunities” (p. 13). Teacher-directed activities included all contexts where the educator took the lead in transmitting academic content related to literacy, and consisted of direct whole class, small group, and individual student instruction. A total of 1755.75 minutes of recorded footage was coded across all 12 classrooms.

**Data Analysis and Reporting**

Teacher interviews were coded line-by-line using an inductive method of analysis (Patton, 2002). Codes were developed from the data and teacher codes were compared across classes using a method of constant comparison. These codes were then organized into common themes that emerged across several teachers, including perspectives on the relationship between play and literacy development and the challenges associated with integrating literacy learning in play.

Classroom videos were categorized by learning context: teacher-directed instruction, play with no adult involvement (free play), or play that included teacher involvement (guided play). Upon completion of the categorization, videos within each category were analyzed using a coding frame consisting of five literacy behaviours (Table 1). Within the coding frame, three literacy skills, *fluency, comprehension*, and *alphabetics*, were based on recommendations from the NRP’s report (2000). While not included in the NRP report, the skill of writing was also included in the analysis as writing skills during kindergarten are predictive of general literacy achievement (Aram and Biron, 2004; Shatil, Share, & Levin, 2000). A fifth skill representing the students’ understanding of text conventions was also added owing to its role in supporting emergent literacy through print awareness (i.e., book handling skills) (Justice and Pullen, 2003).
All five of these literacy behaviours are present within the Ontario kindergarten curricular document (OME, 2016).

Due to the variable nature of play and instructional episodes, video recordings were not a standardized length. An interval coding method was thus selected to analyze the amount of time spent within each of the literacy skills. Each video was coded in 15-second intervals. Within each 15-second interval only the most prevalent literacy behaviour was coded. It is important to note that fluency and comprehension behaviours were generally absent in play-based contexts, which can be partially attributed to the difficulty of coding those behaviours. Student engagement with a text (i.e., looking at a page in a book) could not be reliably coded as independent reading without clear verbal data to corroborate whether they were actually demonstrating fluency or narrative comprehension, thus nearly all footage of student engagement with books was coded as a text convention behaviour. To assess the reliability of the coding, a second independent rater coded 20% of the videos. The interrater reliability as measured by the intraclass correlation coefficient was acceptable at .74.

**Results**

All 12 teachers identified challenges with respect to integrating the teaching of prescribed literacy standards within the play-based learning framework. Specifically, three distinct issues were repeatedly identified in the teacher interviews: 1) direct instruction plays a key role in literacy learning; 2) play is less structured and difficult to plan; and 3) feelings of uncertainty regarding how to get involved in children’s play to promote literacy learning. Each of these themes was evidenced within the observational data. Specifically, the frequency of observed literacy behaviours across each classroom context provided support for the challenges that were described by the teachers.
Challenge #1: Direct instruction plays a key role in literacy learning

**Teacher perspectives.** Although play was consistently viewed by teachers as fulfilling an important role in certain areas of child development, such as in the development of social skills and self-regulation abilities, 50% of these teachers felt that direct instruction fulfilled a key instructional component for promoting early literacy learning. In particular, time dedicated to small group instruction was highlighted as providing a critical opportunity to target early reading skills before children could benefit from less structured activities, like play:

> I wish I had more time for that explicit instruction around reading behaviours because I do think that they do pick it up through the activities you're doing in the room and I love that that can happen in an authentic way but they need the tools first to do that. And I think those tools are best taught in those small group environments. (Teacher 4)

Small group instruction was believed to be the context in which the majority of literacy learning took place: “That’s where I find most of the direct learning happens. When you sit with like three or four of them and really get into stuff” (Teacher 7). Playtime was deemed important, but did not serve the same crucial role as small group instruction: “The play is important, but for me, having the small guided groups are key” (Teacher 2). These teachers emphasized the key role of direct instruction periods for early literacy learning.

**Implementation.** Half of the teachers reported direct instruction as a valuable context for addressing the learning of literacy skills and it was also the most prevalent classroom context observed, accounting for 4987 (71%) of all intervals. This included periods of both large and small group instruction directed by teachers. Furthermore, the mean for total literacy behaviours observed was highest in the context of direct instruction ($M = .54$, $SD = .15$), observed
approximately 54% of the time in this context, when compared to guided play and free play. Teachers expressed the viewpoint that focused teaching, particularly in small group settings, served as an essential component of literacy instruction, and this was reflected in the higher rates of literacy behaviours present in this context compared to guided play and free play. While teachers did not specifically discuss the teaching of alphabetics in this context, it was the literacy behaviour observed most often (M = .24, SD = .16), followed by fluency (M = .11, SD = .07).

The expressed perspective that direct instruction played an essential role in students’ learning may have been influenced by structural factors currently in place in kindergarten in Ontario. For example, 67% of these teachers discussed one or more structural factors impacting pedagogical decisions, such as experiencing pressure to ensure their students met the high academic standards contained within the current curriculum: “The board expects the SKs [Senior Kindergarten students – 5 year olds] to be reading at a particular level, there’s a lot of pressure, and they’ve now put that level up higher…it’s hard with that pressure coming down from the board, especially now with this new play-based program” (Teacher 1). High accountability standards throughout the elementary years have resulted in teachers feeling “that top down stress about going into grade one” (Teacher 7). The kindergarten curriculum presented a challenge for these teachers in terms of its size: “I feel that the curriculum is huge. I don’t know how we’re supposed to do it” (Teacher 9). The teachers felt pressure to ensure that they addressed all of the academic standards present in the curriculum, which may have impacted the choice to focus predominantly on direct instruction in the classroom.

**Challenge #2: Play is less structured and difficult to plan**

**Teacher perspectives.** Following from the importance of dedicating time to teacher-directed instruction, play was viewed as containing far less structure from adults and requiring
more flexibility in planning than direct instruction, which was an expressed source of difficulty for 50% of these teachers when implementing a play-based curriculum. In the Ontario kindergarten program teachers are mandated to provide time for students to engage in self-directed free play, while at the same time to ensure that children meet curricular benchmarks. In order to fulfill both of these mandates, the curriculum advises that teachers embed academic content within children’s play; however, the open-ended nature of play resulted in confusion. “I would like it more structured. I’m used to the old way I taught kindergarten, when I first started teaching, there was more structure in it. Now it’s just open-ended. I’m so confused sometimes on what to do” (Teacher 11). Furthermore, not only was it difficult to infuse academic learning within free play, but several teachers described the challenge of sharing control with the children. Dedicating time to child-directed play activities meant that teachers must give up control and maintain a flexible position in the classroom, resulting in teachers not always being able to follow a desired schedule. “We have to kind of take into account it’s the children’s ideas that are driving it, so, I don’t know, I feel like I’m not really in control” (Teacher 1). Half of these teachers conveyed the challenges inherent in following the children’s lead as it was less structured by adults, resulting in teachers experiencing some confusion and a perceived lack of control over what can be done to enhance children’s academic learning within their free play activities.

**Implementation.** Teachers’ reported challenges concerning the unstructured nature of play may have stemmed from the lack of literacy behaviours that emerged within children’s own free play, as literacy behaviours were observed the least often within this context. Children’s free-play contexts were observed within 1664 (23.7%) of intervals. Children in these classrooms spent on average 28% of their time engaged in literacy behaviours within free play (M = .28, SD
= .14), compared with approximately 54% of the time within direct instruction. With respect to the literacy behaviours that did occur, writing (M = .12, SD = .10) and text conventions (M = .11, SD = .06), were observed the most often, which did not align with the strong focus on alphabets observed during teacher-directed instruction. Of the means that were reliably calculated, alphabets was observed the least often (M = .05, SD = .05), and one third of the classrooms had no alphabets-integration during free play. The previous observation that alphabets was the most frequently occurring literacy behaviour in teacher-directed instruction suggests that alphabets were generally strongly promoted by teachers, but scarcely present during free play; and this was reflected in the teachers’ viewpoint that free play posed challenges as a context for literacy learning.

**Challenge #3: Teachers are uncertain about how to implement guided play**

**Teacher perspectives.** 67% of the participating teachers expressed some uncertainty when discussing the implementation of guided play in their classrooms. Although they cited difficulties with following the children’s lead in play to promote learning, they expressed some confusion regarding how to find a middle ground between teacher-led direct instruction and child-led free play: “I’m really interested in learning about the study and more about play…and literacy and language because it always feels like it’s either instruction or play but why can’t there be somewhere kind of in the middle?” (Teacher 3). Teachers expressed some confusion regarding the optimal role of the adult during times of play and what can be done in the moment to support academic learning: “What do you do? What’s your next step? What do you say, how do you say it back? You know talking them through it. And it’s hard” (Teacher 10). These teachers shared many unanswered questions regarding how to effectively implement guided play.
Implementation. The majority of these teachers expressed feelings of uncertainty and confusion with respect to how to effectively implement guided play in the classroom, and this was reflected in the low rates of teacher involvement observed in times of play, numbering only 372 of the total intervals (5.3% of the time). However, within this context, literacy behaviours were observed on average 40% of the time (M = .40, SD = .26) across the classrooms, an increase from an average of 28% of the time within free play. The low incidence of guided play observed and the teachers’ expressed lack of clarity regarding how to implement guided play demonstrate that these teachers had not yet wholly integrated guided play strategies into their teaching pedagogies.

Although guided play was the context observed the least often, when teachers did become involved in children’s play, there was an increase in observed literacy behaviours over free play alone. It was found that the context of guided play contained the greatest amount of variability in literacy behaviours among the three contexts, as represented by the high standard deviations in each observed literacy behaviour in that context; however, key literacy behaviours such as alphabolics were observed within times of guided play at similar rates as in direct instruction (alphabetics in guided play: M = .16, SD = .16). This is notable as it demonstrated that taken as an instructional context, guided play can provide similar levels of exposure to core literacy domains, though because it was delivered in the activity of play, students may have been more motivated to engage with that content (Bulunuz, 2013; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995). The observed rates of literacy behaviours suggest that guided play could be a valid context for promoting literacy behaviours, however, there was little consistency in how this was performed.

Discussion
Three core themes emerged through exploring teacher perspectives about the integration of literacy education within a play-based learning pedagogy and observing how this integration is enacted within the classroom. Each of these themes comprised a challenge that was inherent for implementing a play-based learning curriculum. Namely, the participants in this research identified apprehensions about the efficacy of play as a context for literacy learning, the difficulties of planning free play experiences, and confusion about their roles within play activities. These themes were consistent across the classrooms, and reflected the challenges that teachers experienced when planning a play-based learning program that was both developmentally appropriate as well as accountable for student literacy achievement.

**Free Play**

The curriculum mandates that children be provided opportunities to engage in self-initiated free play (OME, 2010). Many of the teachers in this study did not believe that free play alone would suffice for their students’ literacy acquisition, and indeed, most classrooms demonstrated few literacy behaviours during free play. This apprehension was reflected in the frequency with which they scheduled direct instruction over other instructional contexts. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that teachers were confident about the role of play for developmental gains, but more sceptical when it came to academic learning (Pui-Wah, 2008). However, teacher perceptions about the value of play for literacy may have also influenced the frequency of children’s literacy behaviours during free play. For example, teachers who believed that play has limited value for literacy learning may be less likely to plan play experiences that contain artefacts of literacy, such as writing tools and books (Pyle et al., 2017), thereby reducing student opportunities to engage with those materials within play.
Teacher beliefs about the lack of efficacy of play for academic learning might be further reinforced by the absence of academic integration that was observed in several of this study’s classrooms. Specifically, if teachers do not witness children demonstrating academic learning during play, as was observed in several classrooms, then the need to implement free play might be perceived as a frustrating necessity. Moreover, the absence of particular literacy behaviours, such as alphabetics, may have prompted teachers to devote more time to covering them within direct instruction. Although we have seen that literacy learning can develop in play experiences (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2014), we also have evidence that teacher involvement is important.

**Guided Play**

Teachers who extend literacy content into guided instruction can deepen children’s learning (Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli Jr., & Kapp, 2013). Moreover, direct instruction of literacy in kindergarten does not ensure that students will meet curriculum targets (Xue & Meisels, 2001), so increasing opportunities for literacy engagement through multiple means may improve children’s literacy skills (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2014). One important way that teachers can promote learning within play is by directly scaffolding academics while taking on an active role in play (Jones & Reynolds, 2015). In this study, the challenge of planning play experiences that provide opportunities for academic learning was compounded by teachers’ reported feelings of uncertainty regarding how to embed themselves within play to scaffold the learning. This difficulty may be rooted in the relatively novel move towards play-based learning within elementary education. While children’s play has been the focus of developmental research for decades, the integration of play as a paradigm for academic learning is a more recent shift (Bodrova, 2009; Cheng & Johnson, 2009). The relative novelty of this paradigm for learning means that teachers may not have had opportunities during their pre-service training and in-
service professional development to develop strategies for implementing a play-based learning program. This is consistent with previous research that identified implementation challenges during the initial stages of delivering play-based programs (e.g., Martlew, Steven, & Ellis, 2011). While the curriculum that was in place at the time of the study instructed teachers to create opportunities for both teacher and child-initiated activities, it was less clear about the ways that they could actively participate within the play to encourage the learning of curricular content (OME, 2010). However, in those moments in which teachers did become involved in play, the literacy behaviours increased. While guided play did not account for much of the overall literacy behaviour (only 5.3% of the total intervals were from that context), the rate of alphabetics, writing, and text convention content within that context was comparable to what was observed during direct instruction. Our data echoed the findings of previous research (e.g. Roskos and Christie, 2001) concerning the essential role of adult presence for play-literacy integration by demonstrating that the presence of the educator provided a context in which he or she could scaffold a skill or concept into the play. This is particularly important for literacy components such as fluency and alphabetics, which have been more frequently observed through adult instruction or intervention (Botts et al., 2012). These findings point to the need for additional research and training with respect to classroom-based guided play strategies that can effectively promote literacy learning in play-based kindergarten classrooms.

**Balanced Approach**

Free play did provide the opportunity for some literacy skill development for students as they integrated writing and text conventions with some regularity. However, students’ primary focus during free play is not the development of their own literacy skills and while the opportunity to use these skills in a contextually relevant manner is useful and should not be overlooked, this
context in and of itself is not sufficient for the comprehensive development of literacy skills. That being said, previous empirical findings of the benefits of free play to oral language development, which is a foundational literacy skill, enforce the importance of maintaining this context in kindergarten classrooms (Saracho, 2012).

Alternatively, direct instruction provided the opportunity for students to develop the core literacy skills of alphabetics and fluency. These two skills are essential and are strong predictors of later reading ability (Stahl & Murray, 1994). With the opportunity to develop these essential literacy skills and the knowledge that direct instruction is valuable for students with weaker literacy skills and lower SES (Beck and McKeown, 2007), this instructional context provides a valuable learning opportunity for students. However, this finding is problematized by empirical findings demonstrating that direct instruction is not as effective as play-based contexts for encouraging the development of targeted skills (e.g., Han et al., 2010).

Guided play provides a context where the provision of teacher direction and extension in play-based contexts provides the opportunity to integrate free play and direct instruction. Previous research has expounded the benefits of this approach to the development of literacy skills (Han et al., 2010). However, our findings demonstrate that teachers are struggling to integrate this pedagogical approach in kindergarten classrooms as they are lacking clarity concerning their role in their students’ play, including how and when to get involved.

Considering the challenges and benefits inherent in each of these pedagogical contexts, our findings demonstrate the need to create a balanced pedagogical approach that includes various modes of instruction and learning, including free play, direct instruction, and guided play. The teachers in the current study conveyed the desire to implement different types of play as well as direct instruction in the classroom to strive for a pragmatic and balanced approach to
early literacy learning. These findings are consistent with international studies from the United States, Singapore, and Israel that have examined the beliefs of kindergarten teachers and found that these educators primarily endorsed an eclectic or balanced approach to literacy learning, rather than one single method or teaching strategy (Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Lim & Torr, 2007; Sverdlov, Aram & Levin, 2014). One difficulty with developing a balanced instructional approach for a play-based curriculum is that the research on guided play and direct instruction tends to be either separate, or comparative of the two (i.e. Botts et al., 2014). More studies that examine the integrated use of both guided play and direct instruction would support our understanding of their respective roles for helping young children to learn. In addition, the research concerning free play primarily considers its role in the development of more personal and social skills than academic learning, and studies that address the development of academic skills, such as literacy skills, in the context of free play are uncommon. Thus, the need to examine the implementation of various forms of play in kindergarten classrooms, and the role these play forms have in student learning is essential to the successful shift from strictly academic kindergarten programs to programs that emphasize academic learning through developmentally appropriate practices such as play-based learning.
References


Binder, M. (2014) The storied lives children play: Multimodal approaches using storytelling,
Challenges of Literacy & Play


Lynch, M. (2014) Ontario kindergarten teachers’ social media discussion about full day


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy Behaviour</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Fluency           | • Learning/teaching sight/high frequency words (no deconstruction)  
|                   | • Playing with/manipulating sight/high frequency words  
|                   | • Modeling reading orally  
|                   | • Automatic decoding of text/fluent reading |
| Comprehension     | • Vocabulary instruction  
|                   | • Inferencing/discussing meaning of a text  
|                   | • Checking understanding of a text |
| Alphabets         | • Phonemic awareness games/instruction/discussion/play  
|                   | • Phonics games/instruction/play  
|                   | • Letter knowledge games/instruction play  
|                   | • Spelling associated reading - phonetic reading |
| Writing           | • Instruction/games/play about writing processes  
|                   | • Modeling writing  
|                   | • Writing during play/activity |
| Text Conventions  | • Playing with books/text  
|                   | • Modeling text features/reading processes  
|                   | • Handling books/text |