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Within-Classroom Play: Cultivating Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness During the Transition to Kindergarten

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Abstract
Play, of varied type and form, provides opportunities for children to acquire a sense of competence and belonging when engaging in classroom life. The purpose of this study was to investigate ways that the inclusion of play as a curricular component eased academic stressors and supported motivation during the transition to kindergarten. In this qualitative case study, the researcher documented the within-classroom play of one child who had no prior-to-kindergarten schooling experience during her transition. Four months of ethnographic data collection (e.g., participant observation, artifact collection) allowed for a strong narrative to emerge that showed changes and progressions in the child over time. The data were compiled chronologically and analyzed using tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) to illuminate ways that her psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were satisfied through play. The data were also open-coded and analyzed using the constant comparison method of multi-cycle coding to identify broad themes (Saldaña, 2016). The findings were written in a narrative style to tell a story of the focal child's transition period, while illustrating the salient themes: that the child needed (1) structure during play times in order to find a rhythm in kindergarten and (2) time to engage in self-motivated work in order to access and develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study supports scholarship that promotes the integration of play and academics, and contributes to the need for research that illustrates how curricula in early childhood settings work for the people experiencing it.

Keywords Transition to School · Play · Playful Learning · Motivation · Self Determination Theory · Kindergarten

Introduction

The first year of schooling in the United States (U.S.), the kindergarten year, has been described as a "transition between home and school, a bridge between early childhood education and elementary school, and a foundation for social and academic skill development" (Graue, 2006, p. 10). And yet, many children in the U.S. struggle during their transition to kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000), in part, due to the shift from play-oriented to academically-oriented curricular emphases (Graue, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). There remains a need to investigate the integration of academic and play-based curriculum models in kindergarten (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2018), including to study how teachers and children experience their curricular context (File, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to investigate ways the inclusion of play as a curricular component within an academically-oriented kindergarten program eased academic stressors and supported motivation during the transition period, as represented through a single-subject case study of one child's experience during her transition to school. Tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) served as a lens for examining ways that play supported autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The following question guided the study: How did within-classroom play support one child's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness during her transition to kindergarten?

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Literature Review

Policy Context

In recent decades, public schooling in the U.S. has become increasingly oriented to standards-based curriculum and assessment, including for the youngest students (Hatch, 2002). This has occurred in response to federally-mandated high-stakes accountability measures that resulted from reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, namely "No Child Left Behind" in 2001 and "Every Student Succeeds Act" in 2015. In a similar span of years, time for play as a curricular component in public school kindergartens has declined (Bassok et al., 2016). Not only has time for play declined, Souto-Manning (2017) argued that play is "denied" to children "in the name of rigor and academics" (p. 785). They critiqued the focus on standards-based accountability and, citing article 31 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), made clear the responsibility that educators have to be accountable to upholding every child's right to play. If play continues declining and is denied to children in public schools, where the emphasis on standardized curriculum and assessment is most salient, researchers will lose the opportunity to study phenomena related to play within public school contexts.

Transition to School

School "readiness" and transition to kindergarten are phenomena unique to the kindergarten year of schooling in the U.S. The notion that children must be "ready" to enter kindergarten emerged from the establishment of National Education Goals, which stated that "by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn" (Kagan et al., 1995, p. 1). The technical planning group who worked to operationalize the goal identified five dimensions of readiness: physical/motor, social and emotional, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge (Kagan et al., 1995).

Whereas, age had historically been the readiness marker for school entry, the national goal changed the conception. Readiness shifted from being viewed as something innate and within every child to something outside of the child that could be identified with specific markers and subsequently promoted, fostered, and ensured (Brown, 2018). Brown discussed the shift as one that prompted policymakers to focus reform efforts toward a narrower emphasis on expectations for later academic achievement and high-stakes testing outcomes. Kindergartens became increasingly academic in the years that followed.

School readiness initiatives often focus on the transition to kindergarten due to the difficulties that nearly half (48%) of all children experience during this period (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Scholars have asserted that one reason for the difficulty is due to the shift from play-based preschools to academically-oriented kindergartens (Graue, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues' study, teachers reported that children struggled to follow directions, lacked basic academic skills, and had difficulty working independently. Structurally, in recent decades, many kindergartens grew from half day to full day programs (Bassok et al., 2016), making the transition to a full day of school a new experience for children who attended half day preschools and even more so for children with no prior-to-kindergarten schooling experience.

The discourse that exists around the idea that children must possess particular skills to be ready to enter kindergarten places children in harm's way when they are labeled as "behind" upon entry to school. In the present study, the focal participant fell into the demographic of having no formal schooling experience before entering kindergarten. This element of the research provided insight in relation to the preservation of play in kindergarten as a practice that supports children who enter school as ready-because-they-are-five-year-old children.

Decline in Play in Kindergarten

Bassok and colleagues (2016) used nationally representative longitudinal data to analyze changes in kindergarten from 1998 to 2010 and published their findings in an article entitled, "Is kindergarten the new 1st grade?" They found that in many ways the answer was simply "yes." Kindergartens in 2010 were focused on literacy and math content that was more advanced than what was previously expected. They also found that kindergarten teachers expected more academic readiness from children when they entered, and more academic achievement from children throughout the kindergarten year. Further, classrooms in 2010 included more teacher-directed instruction and standardized assessment and fewer opportunities for the arts, science, and child-selected activities (Bassok et al., 2016).

Alongside ideological shifts in conceptions of school readiness (e.g., Brown 2018; Kagan et al., 1995) and practice-based shifts, illustrated in Bassok and colleagues' (2016) longitudinal work, since the early 1990s, research has demonstrated that children experience stress in kindergarten environments that are primarily whole-group oriented, teacher-directed, and rely heavily on the use of paper-pencil

tasks (Burts et al., 1990; Rescorla et al., 1991). Some visible signs of stress include children biting fingernails, chewing shirt collars, eating pencil erasers, and acting out in a variety of other ways (Burts et al., 1990; Stipek, 2011). In sum, academic pressures and stress have increased and time for play has declined in U.S. kindergartens.

Combatting the play decline requires scholars to seek out and continue studying in K-12 schools where play remains present within classrooms in an effort to continue building empirical support for the importance of play in educational settings. In particular, within U.S. public schools, where standards-based accountability measures are pervasive. Shedding light on ways that teachers facilitate play within the high-stakes contexts that surround their work can provide useful information to other practicing teachers and also to teacher educators who are responsible for mentoring novice teachers into the field.

Benefits of Play and Playful Learning

Play is intrinsically motivating. It is done for its own sake, out of pure interest and enjoyment of the learner (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and provides the foundation for the propensity that humans have for life-long learning (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Playful learning has been found to foster children's engagement, interest, autonomy, and attention (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Timmons et al., 2016). Play supports children's wellness and thriving and their motivation to engage in school life (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, both play (child-initiated and -directed activity) and playful learning (teacher-initiated playful activity) are associated with characteristics of intrinsic motivation, which predicts student engagement and is associated with higher academic achievement (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2014).

Play has been found to decrease individuals' stress levels (Yogman et al., 2018) and to support the development of soft skills that support children as they transition to kindergarten: "kindergarten teachers consistently name the skills that make up executive functioning and emotion regulation as key components of young students' ability to successfully handle the first few months of formal schooling" (Raver & Blair, 2016, p. 105). Current research affirms that "play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (e.g., the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions" (Yogman et al., 2018, p. 1).

Thus, play and academic learning are not at odds with one another (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022; Graue, 2011; Pyle et al., 2018; Raver & Blair, 2016). Teacher-guided play supports children's learning in the areas of math (Clements & Sarama, 2008), literacy and language (Han et al., 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 2006), social and emotional skills (Ashiabi, 2007), and executive functioning (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Both academic and social skills must be part of a core curriculum in children's education (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2004).

Conceptual Lens: Play

Play has been difficult to operationalize due to its complexity. In recent years, scholars have conceptually presented play as broader than free play (Allee-Herndon et al., 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2018). By presenting play as multi-faceted, researchers are better able to identify when learning is playful, though it may not fit within traditional conceptions of free play, which is commonly identified by characteristics of fantasy and make-believe (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). While free play has historically been the dominant type of play in pre-school spaces, public school kindergartens in the U.S. may or may not have time in their daily schedule for free play at all (Bassok et al., 2016). In the present study, I relied on notions of play as multi-faceted, and sought to holistically illustrate the usefulness of different play engagements, ranging from free play (child-initiated and -directed activity) to directed play (teacher-initiated and -directed playful activity).

Theoretical Lens: Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) served as a lens for examining ways that one child was motivated to participate in her kindergarten classroom during play-based engagements by considering ways that her basic psychological needs were being met. SDT provides a framework for considering how people's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied and also how they are frustrated (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The three basic psychological needs of SDT are outlined in Table 1.

SDT was also a useful lens for analyzing the child's learning environment. SDT asserts that satisfaction of basic psychological needs is intertwined with students' motivation to engage in learning environments and that structures within learning environments allow for motivation to become internalized (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy supportive environments are optimal for student learning when compared with controlling environments (Vansteenkiste et al., 2009). Though, Jang and colleagues (2010) found that autonomy support alone is not as beneficial as autonomy support and structure within learning environments.

Table 1 Characteristics of three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017)

Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
Experienced when individuals are able to take initiative in their learning environment and thus feel a sense of ownership over their learning	Experienced when individuals are able to thrive, feel a sense of success and growth, and achieve mastery when working through prompts and provocations associated with the given context of learning	Experienced when individuals are able to connect with others (e.g., peers, teachers) interpersonally, and feel a sense of belonging
Individuals can act on their interests and engage with materials and ideas that they value		Conveyance of respect and care are key to facilitating learners' relatedness
Experienced when individuals are able to take initiative in their learning environment and thus feel a sense of ownership over their learning	Well-structured learning environments that provide appropriate challenges and teachers who provide ongoing feedback are vital to satisfying learners' competence	

The Present Study

Ryan & Deci (2020) noted that more qualitative research is needed using SDT as a framework to provide a "detailed picture of experiences, practices, and motives involved in need supportive schools and to facilitate translational research for everyday use" (p. 9). In relation to curriculum in early childhood education (ECE) programs, File (2020) explained that much of the literature base is focused on *if* curricula works (outcomes) more than *how* curricula works (enactment), stating that "there is much to learn about how teachers and children interact within the curriculum and how the curriculum supports learning and development" (p. 7). File drew contrasts between how researchers approach investigations of curriculum: either as an independent variable being implemented with fidelity, or as something nuanced that revolves around the lived experiences of the people interacting with it. In the former, children are often absent from the theorizing; whereas, in the latter, they are a central part of it.

This study was an in-depth look at a child's lived experiences in relation to how play-based aspects of the kindergarten curriculum served as a means for easing difficulties she faced during the transition to school. I sought to provide rich and thick description of experiences, practices, and motives surrounding the child's transition to a socioculturally diverse public school in relation to tenets of SDT, including ways in which the classroom environment was a needs supportive space that provided autonomy support and structure. The following question guided the study: How did within-classroom play support one child's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness during her transition to kindergarten?

Methodology

Case study design was employed as there was a natural boundedness to studying one child's transition experience within her kindergarten classroom in relation to how her needs were met during play (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I spent four months at the research site as a participant observer. The focused attention given within the site allowed for holistic and concrete descriptions of contextual particulars and facilitated in-depth investigation.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in a public school, Gardenview Early Childhood School[1] (GECS), which housed PreK, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms. There were seven sections of each grade-level at the time of the study. Enrollment at GECS was approximately 367, with 110 of the children enrolled in kindergarten. The average kindergarten class size was 16. Demographically, 87% of the children were considered "low income" by the state's report card website, 25% were English Learners, and 15% had individual education plans (IEPs). Racial and ethnic diversity included children who were raced as white (58%), Black (8%), Hispanic (22%), Asian (5%), and as two or more races (7%).

The classroom in which the data were collected was purposefully selected. On a sampling survey, the teacher indicated that time for within-classroom play was an essential part of the daily schedule. Thus, though longitudinal trends show that time spent on academic content has increased and time for play has declined (Bassok et al., 2016), I investigated a child's experience within a kindergarten classroom in which the teacher was committed to providing time for children's within-classroom play every day.

The focal participant, Evangeline, turned six-years-old in the midst of data collection. She had no formal schooling

[1] All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

experiences prior to entering kindergarten full of energy, spunk, and embodying a trove of knowledge from her preschool world. Evangeline was purposefully selected as the focal child because she did not attend a formal preschool program; rather, she had been at home up until kindergarten entry. Evangeline's transition from home to school was challenging. She was unfamiliar with school norms and was unresponsive to the teacher's directions and re-directions at the beginning of the year. For instance, when the teacher talked with her about behavior expectations, Evangeline did not respond and turned and walked away. When attempts were made to re-direct Evangeline, she continued what she desired. For instance, when asked to move to a different activity due to space constraints, she did not move. During whole group gatherings on the classroom carpet, Evangeline often excused herself, spending ample amounts of time in the hallway during teacher-directed lessons. Over time and with support, Evangeline settled into classroom life.

Evangeline's teacher, Tasha, held a degree in elementary education and was in her twelfth year working in public schools in lower primary grades. She was an instructional aide for three years, a second grade teacher for four years, and this was her fifth year teaching kindergarten at GECS. When we first met, she shared her belief that children "need it [play]" to be successful in kindergarten. What Tasha loved most about teaching was seeing children grow, "You know, in 2nd grade you don't see that much growth. You see some growth. But, kindergarten is like you really have such an impact."

Institutional Review Board approval was granted prior to recruiting participants for this study. All of the children in Tasha's class gave assent for me to visit. Written informed consent was gained from Tasha and was sought from the children's parents. The types of consent for documenting children's actions and interactions during play included jotting field notes, taking photographs, and collecting work samples. Data were collected according to the consent given on returned forms. Evangeline's mother gave consent for all types.

Data Collection

Ethnographic data collection methods (e.g., participant observation in naturalistic environments, writing of field notes, informal conversations with participants) were employed in order to explore ways that within-classroom play supported Evangeline's transition to kindergarten (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Dyson and Genishi discussed the importance of negotiating one's role when engaging in classroom-based case study research, and that this process is different when negotiating with teacher participants and child participants. For instance, Tasha and I had an understanding that my intention was to be a "fly on the wall" observer who would watch closely, listen carefully, and ask questions along the way (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Savin-Baden & Major 2013). She did not ask me to instruct or discipline children or to complete any assistance-type tasks, like passing out supplies. In practice, I did offer support at times; for example, when a child got sick without a moment's notice, when children were crying or in a crisis state, or were in serious conflict. With the children, I told them I was interested in learning about their play and that I would be writing about their play; thus, I would not be able to play with them. In practice, I allowed the rhythms of classroom life to direct my interactions with the children during their play. When they wanted to show me their work, tell a story, or requested help, I did not reject their requests. Above all, I was committed to a taking a position in which I would do no harm, including emotional harm, and participated with the children when they asked for specific support. When invited, I participated; otherwise, I remained a watchful observer (Dyson & Genishi).

Approximately 70 participant observation hours were spent in Evangeline's classroom over a four-month period. Field notes were generated, either by typing into a tablet program while in the classroom or directly after time spent within the classroom. Photographs of children involved in play and of work samples created during play (e.g., drawings, writings) were collected ongoingly.

Table 2 A priori code list (Ryan & Deci, 2020)

Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
Initiative	Capability	Belonging
Ownership	Mastery	Connection
Interest	Success	Relationships
Curiosity	Growth	Respected
Value	Healthy challenges	Cared for

Data Analysis

The data were compiled into a chronological collection. A priori codes, delineated from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020), were relied on to analyze ways that autonomy, competence, and relatedness were visible in Evangeline's within-classroom play. Ryan and Deci explicitly articulated descriptors associated with the tenets of SDT, which allowed me to apply terms from their work as a priori codes (see Table 2 for an a priori code list). Additionally, the data were open-coded and analyzed using the constant comparison method of multi-cycle coding to identify broader themes related to Evangeline's transition experience (Saldaña, 2016).

As an external check of the analysis, a colleague read the findings with a critical lens and was asked to identify any signs of over-assertions that were not supported with

Table 3 Within-classroom child-directed play times and types

Play Times, Titles on Class Schedule	Brief Description
30 min. upon arrival, Free Play	child-initiated and
20 min. at mid-morning, Free Play	-directed open-ended play
20–30 min. before lunch, Literacy Centers	child-initiated and
20–30 min. at mid-afternoon, Math Centers	-directed open-ended play
30–40 min. at end of day, Explore Bins	teacher-initiated, child-directed playful activities
	teacher-initiated, child-directed playful activities
	teacher-initiated, child-directed building and manipulatives (fine motor) playful activities

evidence from the data. Other credibility measures included persistent observation, prolonged engagement, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Themes suggested that Evangeline needed (1) structure during play times in order to find a rhythm in kindergarten and (2) time to engage in self-motivated work in order to access and develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Findings

The findings illustrate ways that environmental structures and time for play provided for Evangeline's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to be met over time. As these psychological needs were met, Evangeline's motivation to engage in the learning environment became evident during observations. The findings are presented in a chronological manner to illustrate ways that Evangeline's progress unfolded over time, and in a narrative manner to emphasize that this is a story of Evangeline's transition to kindergarten. The crafting of the findings section also brings to light how Tasha and Evangeline were interacting within and experiencing the play-based aspects of the curriculum in this kindergarten (File, 2020).

Beginning of Semester

Needs-Supportive Structures: Time and Organization for Child-Directed Play

The daily schedule included blocks of time for child-directed play (see Table 3), creating an autonomy-supportive space from the beginning of the year. Tasha explained routines and procedures for each type of play. For instance, there were no limitations on movement or number of children in a space during free play; however, during centers, the children worked in pairs. She also embedded visual cues, like color-coding the materials bins, to support the children's accessibility and navigation of the environment.

Fig. 1 Evangeline dramatizing with magnetic dolls

Autonomy: Figuring Out How to Embrace It

With the given structures in place and seemingly feeling the freedom that Tasha intended the children to feel, Evangeline was not sure how to begin. In late August, during literacy centers, I recorded the following: *Evangeline never settled today. She wrote letters in rice for three minutes, went to the sink to 'wash' her hands (didn't run the water), slowly passed by the dramatic play area, retrieved her book tub and had just sat down when it was time to clean up.*[2] Even during free play, Evangeline wandered. She had autonomy to make choices during play, but struggled to engage. This changed when Tasha introduced her to magnetic dolls and she began consistently retrieving the materials. She dressed the dolls and assigned them roles, *"I'm making her a superhero!"* Evangeline exclaimed, showing me her doll (see Fig. 1). She grinned, successfully working with classroom materials. Tasha's facilitation of play with the dolls invited Evangeline to join in with school life.

Mid-Semester

Needs-Supportive Structures: Engaging Materials

Seasonally, Tasha compiled thematic books in a bin, introduced them to the children, and established an open invitation for them to book browse during times in the daily schedule reserved for free play and literacy centers. Free write materials were available for the children's use during

[2] Italicized text was drawn from field notes.

Fig. 2 Evangeline engaging in literacy practices

free play and literacy centers as well. When Tasha had extra copies, she placed the what-would-have-gone-in-recycling pages into a basket on a shelf labeled "free write." This shelf also housed engaging materials, like hole punches that punched different shaped cut-outs, a tape dispenser, a stapler, and colored pencils that had four colors of lead protruding from the mark-making end. The children could access scissors, markers, and the materials in their individual materials bins (e.g., pencils, crayons, glue sticks) for free writing.

Competence: Quietly Building

Beginning with the butterfly book bin and a study of monarchs, Evangeline became engrossed in book browsing. She demonstrated an interest for literacy and, in addition to reading, she also began exploring free write materials that were available for the children's use during free play (see Fig. 2). While many children showed an interest in free writing, Evangeline remained in a parallel state, working at a separate table from other children. Noticeably, she was exploring much differently than her peers. The core group of children were doing worksheets in accordance with their form. Evangeline was using the backsides of worksheets to create her own drawings and stories. Then, she used tape to fasten the papers together into pages. She had developed a method for making books and told me about her work, *"I'm just making a book with people and kittens."*

Evangeline had autonomy to explore books and writing materials at her will. In addition to autonomy, she was finding ways to engage in the classroom in which she demonstrated competence. Still, her reliance on solo play during child-directed play was evident. She did not appear to have or seek out preferred peers at this point in the year, and thus, relatedness in terms of belonging to a group was not yet visible.

Fig. 3 *Playful learning at the Teacher* Table

End of Semester

Needs-Supportive Structures: Teacher Involvement and Playful Learning

Lessons at the "teacher table," where Tasha worked with small groups of children, included the implementation of lessons that were meant to foster playful learning. For instance, when engaging in math practice, Tasha often developed game-like components. One go-to activity involved laying out flashcards face down and placing Unifix cubes on each card. The children took turns choosing a card, counting the number of objects shown, and producing the number name for the last number in the given counting sequence. When successful, they kept the Unifix cube, building a tower with each turn. Across lessons, the children's affect indicated enjoyment when working closely with Tasha at the teacher table. Evangeline was often called to work at the teacher table during daily literacy and math centers. Unlike during whole group lessons when Evangeline frequently excused herself from the classroom and spent ample time in the hallway, she was a willing and active participant during small group instruction at the teacher table (see Fig. 3).

Relatedness: Feeling Respected and Connected

By the end of the semester, Evangeline was not as content to play alone and had developed a peer group made up primarily of the other children interested in free writing, and they influenced each other's use of materials. On any given day, Evangeline could be found doing a sight word worksheet; alternatively, the others began creating original works and moved outside the prescribed forms of the worksheets. Evangeline remained interested in dolls and developed a method for creating paper dolls. She also became proficient in making jewelry from paper and was proud to wear it. She generously shared, giving paper dolls and jewelry as gifts to her friends and beamed when they wore the jewelry that she made for them.

Fig. 4 Evangeline making for and role playing with peers

When the paper basket was empty, the group engaged in school play. They would gather together on the whole-group carpet and re-enact recent lessons, morning meeting routines, and create their own scenarios. They involved toys as play props. For instance, stuffed animals were students and magna tile rectangles were iPads (see Fig. 4). Evangeline enjoyed the role of student or teacher and could be heard using Tasha's go-to phrase, *"All set?"* to which her friends replied, *"You bet!"* She also expressed a growing sense of belonging at school and shared that she loved to *"play and read."*

Discussion

This qualitative research provided rich descriptions of the experiences, practices, and motives that took place in a needs supportive learning context, which contributes to the SDT literature (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ways that Tasha and Evangeline interacted within and experienced the play-based curriculum and how the curriculum supported Evangeline's growth were illustrated, contributing to the field of early childhood education (ECE) curriculum (File, 2020). This scholarship supports the integration of play and academics (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2018), and demonstrates that play-based curriculum can continue to be implemented in U.S. public school kindergartens where high-stakes accountability measures are, in part, attributed to the decline in time for play (Bassok et al., 2016). By centering Evangeline's experiences, the child was central to the assertions put forward in this research.

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential that play has to serve as a means for easing children's transition to kindergarten in relation to their basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness being met. Analyses and representations of the data illustrated ways that within-classroom play eased the home-to-school transition in Evangeline's case. Though she faced challenges during her transition to a new sociocultural space, she found a rhythm in kindergarten over time. My main assertion is that play and playful learning were pathways for Evangeline's success as they provided support for her basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to be satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Essential to the research question under investigation, How did within-classroom play support one child's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness during her transition to kindergarten?, the data provided evidence that demonstrated the three needs central to SDT were satisfied in many ways during Evangeline's play and playful learning experiences. Autonomy was the first need met fairly immediately, as was visible when she made choices about the materials she engaged with during play. Autonomy was followed by competence, which emerged as Evangeline began to find value in the child-selected play materials (e.g., free writing). Relatedness took more time to become established. Evangeline preferred solo play for much of the semester and, over time, built relationships with peers during play. As Ryan & Deci (2020) posed, all needs being met was necessary for Evangeline to succeed. As her needs were more fully satisfied, she was motivated to engage and became a thriving participant in classroom life. Overall, Evangeline needed (1) time to engage in self-motivated work and (2) structure during play times in order to find a rhythm in kindergarten.

The structure within the needs supportive environment that Tasha fostered as well as Tasha's involvement in Evangeline's play and playful learning experiences were important factors. Evangeline benefited from Tasha's direct facilitation (e.g., introducing her to the dolls) and her indirect facilitation (e.g., ensuring a well-structured environment for play), in tandem with her practice of stepping back and providing ample time for the children to engage in self-motivated work. By providing time and structure for play-based engagements, Tasha cultivated Evangeline's motivation to engage during her transition to kindergarten.

Implications

Play as a Support During the Transition to Kindergarten

When considering that nearly half of kindergarteners struggle with the transition to school (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000), purportedly due to the shift from play-based preschools to academically-oriented kindergartens (Graue, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), play-based engagements were found to be critical in supporting Evangeline as she crossed the transitional bridge into kindergarten. Play and playful learning provided Evangeline, who represented children who are not necessarily "ready" for kindergarten with space to bloom. Play provided a safe learning context and supported her as she entered the academic world.

Evangeline struggled to engage with whole-group teacher-directed lessons, which have become more common in kindergarten, and showed strengths during child-selected play, which has become less common in kindergarten (Bassok et al., 2016). In Evangeline's case, it is arguable that she may not have made the growth in her identity as a student, sense of belonging with peers, or found her passion for literacy had there not been time in the day for child-selected play (e.g., playing school, free writing). Through reliance on qualitative methods, this study illustrated an in-depth example of how motivation supported academic growth. What Evangeline was inclined to engage with during play resulted in development of an interest in literacy and interpersonal skills. Essentially, motivation for learning was cultivated during play-based engagements when she was able to follow innate curiosities and take initiative as an agent of her schooling experience.

Based on the findings of this study, practice-based implications for teachers and teacher educators can be drawn. Specialized attention to play as an integral component of content and curriculum should be part of the coursework for preservice teachers who will be certified to teach children through age eight. Further, in-service teachers should be provided with professional development to ensure they are equipped conceptually and with practical skills needed to implement play-based curriculum. Kindergarten teachers in particular should have opportunities to learn about the importance of play for young children due to their unique responsibility to foster children's successful transition to school. This focus requires that teacher educators are knowledgeable about the value of play as a catalyst for young children's wellness and thriving (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Play Equity: Play and Playful Learning as a Right

In this study, children had various pre-school experiences. The variety included that some children had attended the local Head Start, the state-funded PreK program within the public school, private childcare, or, in Evangeline's case, had been at home with a primary caregiver. Given the range of children's prior-to-kindergarten experiences, it is vital to keep in mind that play is accessible to all children due to it being intrinsically motivating and coming from within the children themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If play continues to decline (Bassok et al., 2016) and is denied to children (Souto-Manning, 2017) in public school kindergarten classrooms, it may be difficult for children who are beginning their formal educational journey to enter into school life in meaningful ways.

Implications for scholarship include continuing to study play and playful learning as components of equitable education programs for children, considering the question "is play a privilege or a right?" (Souto-Manning, 2017). In U.S. public schools, the heightened use of standardized curriculum and assessment and the implementation of high-stakes accountability measures may hinder teachers' reliance on play-based curriculum. In this case, Tasha demonstrated her belief that play was a right for the children in her socioculturally diverse public school kindergarten class. Though, she did not rely solely on free play as the pathway for ensuring they were motivated to engage in the learning environment. Teacher-directed playful learning activities were also a source of Evangeline's willful participation and acclimation to school. It is imperative that scholarship continues to uncover public school teachers' play-based curriculum work and is accessible to policymakers and public school stakeholders.

This study contributed to, and invites further scholarship that supports, broadening conceptions of play (Allee-Herndon et al., 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2018). In light of the decline in play, it is plausible that some classrooms may lack time for free play and yet include time for playful learning. In Evangeline's classroom, play and playful learning took shape in a variety of nuanced forms and, by accepting play as a varied concept, I illustrated ways that play and playful learning supported Evangeline's basic needs to be met. For instance, during free play, she developed a sense of autonomy and began making choices within her learning context, and through repeated engagements with literacy materials and support from Tasha's playful learning lessons at the teacher table, she built competence in her literacy skills.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study provided insights into a child's lived experience during her transition to kindergarten. Her interactions within and how she experienced the play-based curriculum were central to the rich descriptions of her transition period (File, 2020). In relation to tenets of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017), processes of Evangeline's development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the public school kindergarten were illustrated to demonstrate the utility of play as a transition support. Importantly, though situated within a U.S. policy landscape that emphasizes high-stakes accountability and achievement outcomes, this study centered Evangeline's thriving and wellness as the visible results of the play-based curriculum. Ryan & Deci (2020) emphasized psychological wellness over academic outcomes, acknowledged that arbitrary achievement markers will not be met by every child, and asserted, "schools should nonetheless be supportive contexts for development, provide conditions that enhance students' adaptive capacities

and mental health, and, importantly, do no harm" (p. 2). This study uplifts the call for play to serve as an equitable educational component for every child (Souto-Manning, 2017).

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