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The Impact of Rigorous Curriculum in Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten Classrooms

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The Impact of Rigorous Curriculum in Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten Classrooms

By

Lauren Clough

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

Educators across the world are being asked to teach academic skills to increasingly younger students. The purpose of this research project was to examine the impact that using rigorous curriculum had on transitional kindergarten and kindergarten educators as well as how rigorous curriculum affected the self-esteem of students. A particular shortcoming in the available literature is the lack of research discussing rigorous curriculum used in early elementary classrooms that contain mostly English language learners and how that affects the teachers and students. This project used a mixed methods approach in order to collect qualitative data from detailed interviews using open-ended questions and close-ended quantitative data from survey questions. The findings from the research show that rigorous curriculum is failing to serve the majority of students, but especially English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. While much of the literature examined the importance of play-based learning, participants mentioned that their students were struggling with the rigorous curriculum mostly due to the lack of social emotional learning opportunities in the curriculum. The findings also show that the impact of rigorous curriculum depends on how the curriculum is selected and implemented. When teachers are not involved in the process of choosing curriculum, teachers may have negative feelings about their profession as well as a loss of efficacy.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Do you remember how hands-on, fun, interesting and playful kindergarten was? A kindergarten where the content was so engaging you did not realize you were even learning? In many schools today, kindergarten looks much different. Kindergarten students are expected to be able to read as many as fifty sight words by the end of the kindergarten school. Educators across the world are being asked to teach academic skills to increasingly younger students. Early childhood educators feel pressured to use rigorous curriculum, which is causing teachers to change their play-based, whole-child teaching practices (Campbell, 2015). Although teachers are pressured to start teaching preschool aged children academic skills, those students are not necessarily benefiting from learning the academic skills at a younger age. Studies show that some students who begin learning academic skills at a premature age end up having more trouble in the social and emotional aspects of school later on (Bodrova, 2008). Studies also show that learning academic skills at an early age does not guarantee future success in school.

Play-based learning is proven to be a developmentally appropriate and successful teaching strategy in early elementary school. However, play-based learning has gradually decreased in use due to the increasing demands of a more rigorous curriculum. Vygotsky and Bodrova have been strong advocates of the engaging learning opportunities that play-based learning offers to students. When play is incorporated into learning, it is not random play but rather a thoughtful, developmentally appropriate strategy that helps students foster a love of literacy as well as self-assurance in an educational setting (Richard, & Han, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Due to the federal government's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) schools have had to standardize their teaching practices, raise student achievement levels and create accountability for student test scores. This reform has forced schools to shift from using developmentally appropriate learning practices such as play-based learning and social-emotional development to using rigorous curriculum and test preparation with a focus on academic skill building, even in the earliest grade levels (Baskot et al., 2016). NCLB has restructured the way that transitional kindergarten and kindergarten programs operate.

Currently, transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers are being faced with “schoolification.” Gunnarsdottir defines “schoolification” as “the practice of formal learning – as in the primary schools – is transferred down to the preschools, and the play-based pedagogy of the preschools set aside” (2014). Due to “schoolification,” learning through play is no longer seen as an appropriate avenue to knowledge acquisition (Gunnarsdottir, 2014).

For most early elementary students, school is a large adjustment. Students must learn new routines, interact with new peers in new social situations and also learn academic skills. This can be especially hard for students who are also English language learners. These students are adjusting to school routines and new social situations in an unfamiliar language. English language learners are not only adjusting to school in an unfamiliar language, they are expected to learn through a rigorous curriculum. However, there is a lack of research literature that specifically discusses how rigorous curriculum

affects English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. This research study hopes to fill that gap.

Existing literature discusses the pressure that early childhood educators across the world are feeling to use rigorous curriculum. This pressure is causing teachers to change their play-based, whole-child teaching practices (Campbell, 2015). The literature discusses the pressure that teachers feel to use rigorous curriculum, but there is a lack of discussion in the current literature on how teacher's perceptions about school and efficacy are affected when teachers are not involved in the process of choosing curriculum.

Statement of Purpose

This research study had two purposes. The first was to examine how the demands of using rigorous curriculum affected the learning experiences and self-esteem of kindergarten and transitional kindergartens students, specifically English language learners. The second purpose was to examine how the demands of using rigorous curriculum impacted transitional kindergarten and kindergarten educators.

Significance of the Study

I am passionate about researching this topic because I have witnessed firsthand the negative implications of teaching rigorous curriculum that is developmentally inappropriate to young children, especially English language learners. Not only did using developmentally inappropriate rigorous curriculum cause negative feelings for me about teaching and school, but as a teacher, I could see that my students were having negative feelings about learning and school as well. I have also witnessed the effect

that the achievement gap has on my English language learners. Educators at my school site are expected to close the achievement gap with our English language learners by using rigorous curriculum. Instead of closing the achievement gap and helping my students improve, I have observed that the use of developmentally inappropriate rigorous curriculum left my students feeling discouraged, resentful, and dissatisfied with learning at a young age. This study aims to find evidence that will provide a persuasive argument for administrators and school districts to consider how developmentally inappropriate rigorous curriculum affects teaching and learning. As the founder of the transitional kindergarten program in the charter organization I work for, I am committed to using the data from this research study to shape how the transitional kindergarten program is perceived and developed in the future.

This study is significant for all early childhood educators as well as elementary school administrators. This study will help administrators understand the impact that using rigorous curriculum has on both students and educators. Secondly, this research study will help initiate conversations between administrators and educators on how curriculum is chosen and implemented in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. This study is also significant for transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers because it allows them to take the findings from this study and adapt the rigorous curriculum being used in their classroom in order to make it accessible for all students.

Summary of Methods

For this research study, seven transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers from five different public and charter schools participated in forty minute

interviews. Five different public and charter school sites in two different school districts were selected to allow for teachers to speak from a diversity of experiences using various curricula. Two of the school sites are charter schools in an urban, low-income neighborhood. Three of the other school sites are public schools in suburban neighborhoods that feature a mixture of students who come from low-income and middle class families. There is also a mixture of native English speakers and English language learners at both of the suburban public schools. The interviews consisted of ten open-ended research questions regarding curriculum use in their classrooms. Lastly, an online survey was sent out to twenty nine transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers from across the country. The findings from this study will be shared with the twenty nine participants who received the online survey, as well as the five different Bay Area schools sites where interviews with the participants took place.

Summary of Findings

This study generated three major findings. Participants discussed that the rigorous curriculum is negatively affecting the majority of their students and that English language learners were struggling the most. The findings also show that the impact that rigorous curriculum has on teachers depends on the role teachers have in the selection process of curriculum. Lastly, rigorous curriculum is impacting the development of social and emotional skills of students in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

Kindergarten in the United States was first established in 1860. Kindergarten was influenced by German educator Friedrich Froebel. By 1959, 70% of school districts in the United States offered kindergarten and by 1986 every state had some sort of kindergarten program (Dombkowski, 2001). Kindergarten was originally a program that focused on “play, flexible physical environments, outside activities and the exclusion of traditional academic subjects.” (Ross, 1976, Russell, 2011). This program was created to help prepare students for first grade by giving them the social skills they needed to transition from home life to formal schooling. In the 1950s, most kindergarten programs focused on the social skills that students needed to acquire before moving on to the first grade. By the 1980s and 1990s, there was a greater push for academic preparation in kindergarten programs. Historically, the purpose of kindergarten programs has been a highly debated subject, especially today.

In previous years, California has had the latest date for kindergarten admittance requiring kindergarten students to turn five by December 2nd. Due to the late admittance rate, one fourth of students in kindergarten classrooms are younger than five when entering kindergarten. Due to the increased demands of kindergarten over the years, in 2010, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act. This act changed the required birthday admittance dates for kindergarten and first grade as well as established the transitional kindergarten program. In order to attend kindergarten, students must be five years old on or before September 1. To currently be eligible for transitional kindergarten in California, the child’s birthday must fall between September 2nd and December 2nd of that school year. Students entering transitional

kindergarten in August will be four years old, turning five on their birthday. From Senate Bill 1381, Chapter 705: Transitional kindergarten is “the first of a two-year kindergarten program that uses a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate.” Transitional kindergarten teachers in California must hold a multiple subject teaching credential. Similarly to kindergarten programs, the purpose of transitional kindergarten programs has also been questioned. Today, many transitional kindergarten programs are emphasizing the development of academic skills over the development of social skills.

The purpose and role of transitional kindergarten and kindergarten programs are not the only educational programs that have been questioned. Over the past few decades, the overall purpose and role of schooling in the United States has been a highly debated topic. There are differing views on the purpose of schooling, which in turn affects how curriculum and teaching practices are implemented. Feldman (2015) discusses the different rhetorical questions that may arise when discussing the role of public and private schools. Is the role of public and private schools to produce good citizens? Is the role of public and private schools to transmit knowledge across academic subjects through rigorous curriculum? Is the role of public and private schools to pass on culture and customs? Throughout the history of schooling in the United States, the core purpose of education has been questioned and debated.

Our current educational system focuses on the transmission of culture through a mesh of academic, social and moralistic expectations (Feldman, 2015). Teachers, especially transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers are asked to teach their students the academic skills they will need to succeed in school as well as the social

and moralistic skills they will need to be a well-rounded member of society. In order to fully implement a schooling system that focuses on the transmission of culture through a mesh of academic, social and moralistic expectations, there must be developmentally appropriate and successful teaching frameworks in place. One framework that has been successful in many schooling systems is the whole child approach (Slade & Griffith, 2013). The whole child approach focuses on the emotional, social, mental, physical and cognitive development of students. This approach believes that every student should feel engaged, supported, challenged, healthy and safe. This framework can be used to successfully create a schooling system that focuses on academic, social and moralistic expectations. Many traditional transitional kindergarten and kindergarten programs use this teaching approach to help develop the whole child socially, emotionally and academically, in order to prepare them for a successful schooling career.

The Impact of Federal Reforms

Although the whole child approach was successfully used in many transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, the implementation of federal standards-based accountability reforms demanded teachers to use less whole child teaching strategies and focus on the implementation of rigorous curriculum. Over the past two decades, two major reforms, No Child Left Behind (2002) and Good Start, Grow Start (2003), caused a major shift in kindergarten programs. These two reforms have caused preschool teachers to feel pressured to teach younger students academic skills in order to prepare them for rigorous kindergarten programs. One main reason of this shift is the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002 under President George W. Bush. The act was

created out of concern that the American educational system was no longer competitive with other countries. This act was created to help all students improve but especially student groups like English language learners, minority students and special education students. If schools did not improve their achievement scores or did not comply with NCLB, schools could lose their Title I funding, which is financial support for schools with high numbers of students from low income families. The federal government's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) caused schools to standardize their teaching practices, raise student achievement levels and hold schools accountable for student test scores.

Due to NCLB, traditional developmentally appropriate learning practices such as play-based learning and social-emotional development have been replaced with rigorous curriculum, test preparation and a focus on academic skill building (Baskot et al., 2016). NCLB has restructured the way that kindergarten programs operate. Baskot et al. (2106) examined and researched the theory that kindergarten classrooms have transformed into first grade classrooms due to NCLB influence on pedagogy and content. In their 2010 study, they found that kindergarten teachers were more likely to believe that academic instruction should begin in preschool relative to their 1998 counterparts (Baskot et al., 2016). Teachers in 2010 were also twice as more likely to expect children to leave kindergarten reading than kindergarten teachers in 1998. In 1988, teachers were more likely to have various activity centers such as art areas, dramatic play areas, science areas and sensory areas such as water and sand tables (Baskot et al., 2016). Many teachers today have less activity centers in their classrooms and less time for play-based learning activities. Most of the changes in how

kindergarten teachers run their classrooms have been influenced by No Child Left Behind.

A second major federal reform in early childhood education is the Good Start, Grow Smart (2002) initiative. The Good Start, Grow Smart initiative was created to strengthen Head Start programs and improve early childhood education. One major component of this initiative was that states were required to create early childhood education standards in language, literacy and math for students ages 3-5 that aligned with K-12 standards. There are many critiques regarding the implementation of standards in early childhood education, and many believe that the standards will create more harm than good.

One critique is that these standards will encourage instruction that is not focused on the individual needs of the students. When the individual needs of the student are not being addressed, students who do not meet the standards may be seen as failures and may suffer from low expectations being placed on them at an early age (Stipek, 2006). When students suffer from low self-esteem in school, it may be harder for them to focus and access the curriculum. When the individual needs of students are being met during instruction, students are more likely to feel successful and be able to access the curriculum.

Another critique of Grow Start, Grow Smart is that the standards do not include or address the social and emotional domains that children need to develop in preschool. Many of these social and emotional milestones are indicators of later academic success, yet they are not a focus of the standards (Stipek, 2006). Experts worry that preschool aged children will be lacking social skills that help children cooperate or share

with others, plan and complete long-term tasks, participate in creative activities such as art and dramatic play, or develop athletic skills (Stipek, 2006). Preschool has traditionally been a time to foster important social skills which will in turn prepare students for future academic success.

Play-Based Learning

In many transitional kindergarten and kindergarten programs, there is a loss of developmentally appropriate practices, which is contributing to the negative perceptions students are developing in regards to school. Developmentally appropriate practices are defined as “teaching decisions that vary with and adapt to the age, experience, interests, and abilities of individual children within a given age range” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006). Many researchers have contended that early childhood education and kindergarten standards are not written with the developmental needs of young children in mind (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Research has shown that play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate teaching strategy for early elementary students. In order to examine play-based learning as a developmentally appropriate practice, it is important to understand what play-based learning entails. Vygotsky and Bodrova have been strong advocates of the engaging learning opportunities that play-based learning offers to students. Vygotsky (1933) argues that social interactions help students develop their cognitive skills and abilities. Children observe people, language and behavior around them and try to imitate what they see. This also occurs during play (Vygotsky, 1933). Children may use different roles when playing as well as try out different types of language and vocabulary. Play allows children to become more confident in their language skills as well as learn how to internalize their own thinking (Vygotsky, 1933).

Bordova argues that preschools and kindergartens should follow a Vygotskian approach to preschool and kindergarten, where students are exposed to the academic skills they need to learn but are acquiring these skills through play-based learning. Bordova believes that make-believe play is one of the most important components of teaching through a Vygotskian approach. Make-believe play has been shown to help students develop new forms of thinking, self-regulation, oral language skills, metalinguistic awareness, and imagination (Bordova, 2008). Bordova suggests that make-believe play in the classroom should feature toys and props that are used in a symbolic way. Make-believe play should also feature consistent and extended play scenarios. In order for make-believe play to be successful, the students must know and follow the play rules that are set up in the classroom (Bordova, 2008).

From a young age, play is a tool used by children to discover the world around them. Silver (1999) defines play as having 5 components: 1) intrinsic motivation, 2) concern with process rather than product, 3) child control of the activity, 4) freedom from externally imposed rules and 5) active participation. When play is incorporated into learning, it is not random play but rather a thoughtful, developmentally appropriate strategy that helps students foster a love of literacy as well as self-assurance in an educational setting (Richard, & Han, 2015). Most importantly, play-based learning helps create a risk-free environment for students to learn.

Play-based learning can take on different forms, including make-believe. Make-believe play, often used with preschool and kindergarten aged children, has been shown to help students develop new forms of thinking, self-regulation, oral language skills, metalinguistic awareness, and imagination (Bordova, 2008). Smilansky (1968)

argues there are six components of make-believe play. In make-believe, students must: 1) include objects, 2) assume a make-believe role, 3) make-believe with an action or situation, 4) be able to continue playing even when faced with a problem, 5) use language to communicate and 6) interact socially while make-believe playing. When scaffolded correctly, make-believe play can be a developmentally appropriate teaching practice used to help English language learners acquire language skills, literacy skills, social skills, and emotional skills (Banerjee, Alsalman, & Al Qafari, 2016).

Perceptions of Play-Based Learning

The perceptions that teachers, parents and students have regarding play-based learning can affect play-based learning inside and outside of the classroom. The perceptions of teachers, parents and students regarding play-based learning can change the way play-based learning is used and understood within the classroom as well as at home. It is important to examine the differing views parents, teachers and students have on play-based learning and how that can affect the implementation of play-based learning.

In a study on the way Euro-American and immigrant Latino parents viewed play, Fasoli (2014) conducted a qualitative study using interviews and naturalistic observations. The study featured 31 Euro-American families and 25 Latino families visiting the Chicago Children's Museum. All of the families in the study featured children ages two through four. For the Latino families, the author found three different approaches to play. The first approach to play was the parents playing with their children at the museum and believing that their child learned something at the museum. The second approach was the parents actively playing with their children but denying

that any learning occurred at the museum. The third approach was the parents watching their children play from afar and separating themselves from their children playing but believing their child learned something at the museum. Although the Latino families had three different approaches to play, the research showed that almost all of the Euro-American families actively played with their children and believed their children learned something at the museum. The research showed that learning through play was more common among Euro-American families but that the view of play varied more amongst Latino families (Fasoli, 2014). The research also supports the concept that parents are more likely to engage in play with their children if they believe that play is a method of learning.

In order to explore student perspectives about play, Wong, Wang and Cheng (2011) conducted a study examining the way primary school students in Hong Kong viewed play at school. The study featured two girls ages five and six in kindergarten and one boy and one girl ages six and seven years old in first grade. These four students were chosen by their teachers to participate in the study because they were the most articulate students in class. The researchers used three methods for collecting data. First, the researchers used photographs to help the students differentiate and make judgements between what they thought was play and non-play activities. Secondly, the researchers asked the students to take pictures of their peers playing and not playing. They also had the students create drawings of play and non-play activities. Lastly, the researchers interviewed the students. The researchers found that both the kindergarten participants and the first grade participants viewed play similarly. Both groups of students viewed play as intrinsically motivating, enjoyable and often involving social

interactions. The first grade students viewed play as more rule-based and included sports in their view of play. Both groups of students viewed non-play activities as serious and uninteresting. The kindergarten participants viewed all activities with the teacher present as non-play. Most of the activities they viewed as play were activities that occurred during recess. In contrast, the first grade participants mostly did homework during recess and rarely engaged in play based activities during that time. When asked, the first grade participants were hesitant to say whether they would choose play time over study time. The researchers suggested their response was due to Hong Kong's negative cultural views regarding play.

Impact of Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is not only a developmentally appropriate teaching strategy for social skills, additionally, various studies have examined the impact play-based learning has on academic achievement. Stagnitti, Bailey, Hudspeth Stevenson, Reynolds and Kidd (2016) studied fifty-four, four year old students aged four for over six months while they began formal schooling in Australia. The study followed and analyzed thirty-four children who attended school using traditional curriculum as well as twenty students who attended school using a play-based curriculum. Both sets of students were given pre-tests before beginning school and post-tests after being in school for six months. The tests that were given were the Child-Initiated Pretend Play Assessment (ChIPPA, Stagnitti, 2007) and the narrative retell component of the School Age Oral Language Assessment (SAOLA, Allen et al., 1993). The researchers were specifically looking to see if play-based curriculum would affect the student's oral language skills. After analyzing the data of the two groups of students, Stagnitti and colleagues (2016)

found that the students who attended school with a play-based curriculum had improved oral language skills as well as improved grammar skills. The students that attended the school using the play-based curriculum also showed greater growth in narrative retelling skills.

Piker (2013) collected data using an ethnographic approach to test her hypothesis that play-based learning can promote English language acquisition. Piker observed and documented a head-start classroom twice a week, three hours a day for one academic year. Piker observed social play interactions between native English speakers as well as English language learners. After analyzing the data, Piker found that one-on-one interactions as well as group interactions influenced the English language learning of the students. Piker found that all types of play interactions were optimal for English learning. Piker's findings supported her hypothesis that mature play involving social interactions among peers is a positive approach to developing student's language learning. Piker also discussed the importance of social interactions during play as well as how play helps with developing academic and social skills.

Huerta and Riojas-Cortez (2014) as well as Palacios, Kibler, Baird, Parr, and Bergey (2015) conducted research examining Mexican-American adult mediated conversations during playtime. Huerta and Cortez, observed a four year old bilingual girl of Mexican heritage while she participated in adult-mediated playful conversations. The girl featured in this case study was able to manage both styles of language and shift between English and Spanish when speaking in social dialogues. The research featured many language samples from the participant and analysis of the language

samples supported their hypothesis that adult mediated communication with bilingual children is crucial in the success of the children's oral skills.

Similarly, Palios, Kibler, Parr and Bergey (2015) researched the interactions between Latino mothers and their second generation Mexican-American children during play time. Palios, Kibler, Parr and Bergey (2015) observed the language use of five mothers while their children participated in a structured play activity. The children used in this study were second generation four year olds who either have a high vocabulary level in Spanish or low levels in both English and Spanish. The researchers focused on the types of questions the mothers asked their children and whether different questions affected children with different vocabulary levels. The researchers focused on two types of questions: perceptual and conceptual questions. Perceptual questions in this study included questions that required naming of figures, yes/no responses and person-identification questions. Conceptual questions mostly included inquiry questions but also included engaging questions. Palios, Kibler, Parr and Bergey (2015) discovered that the types of questions that mothers ask their children during play created the language environment and also positively affected the language production of the children.

Results from both Palios, Kibler, Parr and Bergey (2015) and Huerta and Riojas-Cortez (2014) studies showed the benefit adult-mediated conversations during play had on students' academic achievement. Therefore, play-based learning is not only valuable for academic learning when used by the teachers but through adult-mediated conversations parents have with their children during play time at home.

Huerta and Riojas-Cortez (2014) as well as Palacios, Kibler, Baird, Parr, and Bergey (2015) studies were important studies to review because many of the students that attend the schools featured in this research project are Mexican-American English language learners. How parents perceive play-based learning is an important indicator of how parents will use play-based learning strategies outside of the classroom. These two studies indicate that adult mediated conversations during play helped improve student academic achievement of English language learners.

Eliminating Play-Based Learning

Similarly to teachers in the United States, this section will examine how research from schools in New Zealand and Iceland show that the erosion of play is causing early elementary school programs to change or even lose their original play-based, whole-child teaching practices.

Historically, New Zealand's early childhood education curriculum focused on the wellbeing of the child in an integrated and holistic approach. The role of the community and the family were key factors in the development of early childhood curriculum (Gibbons, 2013). This integrated but informal curriculum approach was created to promote the idea that children would arrive at school happy and ready to learn. In turn, children would develop positive assumptions and experiences about education and school at a young age. Gibbons (2013) argues that if New Zealand creates policies that take away the "seams," or stepping stones between early childhood education and primary education, than unhappiness amongst children in early childhood education may occur. He argues that taking away seams between the two school sectors will

increase regulation, standardization, and measurement of the students as well as a decrease in engagement.

Paralleling New Zealand, prekindergarten teachers in Iceland are also feeling pressured to produce “school-ready” children at a younger age. The whole-child approach, which was the original pedagogy for most preschools in Iceland, focused on the social and emotional development of the child. This was mostly done through play-based learning. Now, preschool teachers are being faced with “schoolification.” Gunnarsdottir defines “schoolification” as “the practice of formal learning – as in the primary schools – is transferred down to the preschools, and the play-based pedagogy of the preschools set aside.” Due to schoolification, learning through play is no longer seen as an appropriate avenue to knowledge acquisition in schools in Iceland (Gunnarsdottir, 2014).

Bodrova, a strong advocate of play, discusses the pressure that educators face across the world as teachers are being asked to teach increasingly younger students academic skills. Although teachers are pressured to start teaching preschool aged children academic skills, those students are not necessarily benefiting from learning the academic skills at a younger age. Studies show that some students who begin learning academic skills at a premature age end up having more trouble in the social and emotional aspects of school later on (Bordova, 2008). Studies also show that learning academic skills at an early age does not guarantee future success in school (Bodrova, 2008).

Rigorous Curriculum and Student Self Esteem

In addition to rigorous curriculum affecting educators across the world, rigorous curriculum also affects student's perceptions about school. Student's perceptions about school and who they are as learners are just starting to form in preschool, transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. If students are already feeling like they are failing due to the developmentally inappropriate standards that are placed on them, their perceptions about school and who they are as learners can be greatly affected (Stipek, 2006). When formal instruction is introduced to students too early or if curriculum is too rigorous, young students may develop a negative perception about school before first grade begins. This negative perception and negative feelings towards school can not only hinder students' academic development, it can also create impressions about school that last throughout their school career (Stipek, 2006).

Rigorous Curriculum and Teacher Perceptions

Although play-based learning has been proven to be a developmentally appropriate and successful teaching tool for transitional kindergarten and kindergarten aged students, teachers are feeling pressured by parents and administrators to use rigorous curriculum that features little to no play-based learning. After surveying 115 educators, the researchers found that educators felt pressured by parents to include formal phonics lessons in preschools settings (Campbell, 2015). Historically, Australian early childhood education followed a play-based but intentional approach to teaching phonics. Currently, teachers are being pressured by parents to use commercially produced phonics programs to teach their preschool students phonics (Campbell,

2015). Campbell also discussed how parental pressure has been a strong driving force in educators teaching formal academic lessons in early education settings.

With the current negative view on play-based learning from parents and administrators, research shows that teachers' understanding and perspective on play was directly reflected in their practices of using play-based learning in the classroom (Moon, & Reifel, 2008). Pyle and Bigelow (2015) engaged in a qualitative study using interviews and observations with three teachers to examine how play-based learning was executed in public kindergarten classrooms in Ontario, Canada. After analyzing the data, the researchers identified three main approaches to integrating play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms: 1) play as peripheral to learning, 2) play as a vehicle for social and emotional development and 3) play as a tool for academic learning.

The teacher whose approach was play as peripheral to learning focused more on the development of academic skills. This teacher had strict administrative standard requirements placed on her, resulting in her being stricter with standards and curriculum use in her classroom. When this teacher defined play-based learning she defined play in terms of academic and developmental applications. The students in this class played twice a day resulting in thirty minutes of play-based learning a day.

The teacher who approached play-based learning as a vehicle for social and emotional development prioritized social and emotional development in her classroom. Although this teacher prioritized social and emotional development in her classroom, she also believed that standardized curriculum was crucial to the success of a kindergarten classroom. This teacher created a flexible curriculum that integrated and

weaved social and emotional skill development into the standardized curriculum. This classroom featured one to two large chunks of child-directed play totaling between 45 to 60 minutes of each day.

The last approach was play as vehicle to academic learning. This teacher defined play as featuring both socialization and academic learning. This teacher used play-based learning activities that went along with curriculum standards. Some of her play was teacher centered but also included at least 60 to 90 minutes per day of child directed play with the teacher observing the students. This teacher felt that play should stem from the interest of the child and not curriculum standards. The teacher struggled with trying to find a balance of play driven by the interest of the child and play driven by standardized curriculum. The three approaches varied according to the individual teacher's perspective on play and how it should be used.

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature, the importance of using developmentally appropriate curriculum and teaching practices with kindergarten and transitional kindergarten students is apparent. Research shows that many transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers are now being urged to use rigorous curriculum instead of developmentally appropriate teaching practices. The literature discusses a multitude of conditions that have caused teachers to use rigorous curriculum in their transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms over play-based learning and other developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Some of these conditions include: a) the increase of academic standards due to the No Child Left Behind and Good Start, Grow Smart initiatives, b) parental pressure and pressure from administration to teach

students academic skills at an earlier age and c) negative perceptions by parents, teachers and school districts towards play-based learning.

The academic research shows that play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate teaching strategy that positively affects social and emotional development as well as language acquisition and academic achievement. Current research has examined how the erosion of play is hindering students, however, it has yet to examine how rigorous curriculum is affecting English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. The literature discusses the pressure that teachers feel to teach using rigorous curriculum, however, there is a lack of research examining the impact teaching using rigorous curriculum has on teachers. The literature has yet to examine how using rigorous curriculum in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms affects teacher perceptions about the profession as well as their efficacy.

Chapter 3 Methods

Research Questions

This study inquire into two primary research questions as follows. 1) How does the use of rigorous curriculum impact the learning experiences and self-esteem of all students, specifically English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms? 2) How does the use of rigorous curriculum impact teachers in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms?

Research Approach

This study used a mixed methods approach in order to collect qualitative data from detailed interviews using open-ended questions and close-ended quantitative data through an anonymous survey. The researcher was able to obtain a more complete understanding of the research problem through the varied collection of data through a mixed methods research approach (Creswell, 2014, p. 19). The goal of the mixed methods approach is to draw upon and use the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data. This study utilized detailed interview notes and teacher responses. With data from both in-depth interviews and surveys, this approach permitted a more complete analysis of the impact that rigorous curriculum had on this sample of educators and students.

Selecting a small sample of participants allowed for the researcher to spend more time with each participant and obtain more detailed responses during the interview process. The quantitative data from the twenty nine teacher surveys gave the researcher a different, larger scale perspective of the research problem. Survey

participants ranged from multiple states and teaching experiences across the U.S., including California, Michigan, South Carolina and Washington.

Sample and Site

This study was conducted between December 2017 and March 2018 at five different elementary school campuses in California. Five different public and charter school sites in two different school districts were selected to allow for teachers to speak from a diversity of experiences using various curricula. Two of the school sites are charter schools in an urban, low-income neighborhood. One of the urban charter schools is made up of mostly Latino students who are English language learners, where the researcher teaches transitional kindergarten. Ninety six percent of the students in the charter school where the researcher teaches are Latino, slightly more than one percent are Asian and almost two percent are African American. Sixty one percent of students at this school receive free or reduced lunch. The second urban charter school is made up of sixty percent Latino students, forty percent African American students and forty-eight percent of their students are English language learners. Eighty-eight percent of students receive free or reduced lunch at this school. Two of the other school sites are public schools in suburban neighborhoods that feature a mixture of students who come from low-income and middle class families. There is also a mixture of native English speakers and English language learners at both of the suburban public schools. The final public school is also in a suburban neighborhood, yet unlike the other suburban public schools, it is made up of students who come from mostly low-income families and the students are primarily mostly all English language learners.

All the teachers who participated in research interviews are women between the ages of twenty five and fifty and teach in transitional kindergarten or kindergarten. One of the participants who works in one of the urban charter schools does not yet have her teaching credential. This participant is currently in school while she teaches kindergarten. Six out of the seven teachers have their California teaching credential. The participating teachers have diverse teaching backgrounds. There is one participant who has over twenty years of kindergarten teaching experience whereas there is another teacher with only three years of kindergarten teaching experience.

All participants who completed a research survey are either transitional kindergarten or kindergarten teachers in the United States who completed an anonymous online survey. Participants for the interviews were recruited through direct email or contacted through the principal of their employment site. Participants for the survey were recruited through a transitional kindergarten Facebook group post.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants participated in a forty minute interview that consisted of ten open-ended questions (See appendix A for the ten interview questions). Interviews occurred at a time, date and location selected by the participants. Participants were informed that the interviews were audio tape recorded. Supplementary notes were recorded by the researcher during the interview but did not include any names or identifying information. These notes focused solely on the teaching practices that occurred and did not include any identifying information about the students. Survey participants were provided with a link using a Facebook page for transitional kindergarten teachers and responded to an

online, anonymous survey. The survey contained ten questions including demographic and open ended questions (See appendix B for the ten survey questions).

Access and Permissions

Formal permissions were solicited, and informed consent obtained from each principal and participant for interviews and observations through a written consent form. A Facebook page for transitional kindergarten teachers was used to contact and solicit informed consent for participation in the online, anonymous survey. This electronic survey included an area for indicating anonymous participant consent prior to its completion.

Research Positionality

The researcher is passionate about this topic because she has witnessed firsthand the negative implications of teaching young children, especially English language learners, developmentally inappropriate rigorous curriculum. Using developmentally inappropriate rigorous curriculum caused the researcher to have negative feelings towards teaching. It also created negative feelings towards school and learning for the researcher's students. Thus, one aim of this study is to better understand the importance of play-based learning and discuss its impact on teachers and students. Although one school site was a convenient choice for the researcher to choose because the researcher works there, this choice was also intentional. The researcher chose to conduct this study at her own school site because she was hoping data from the study will help change how rigorous curriculum is used in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classes at this site as well as throughout the association

of charter schools. The researcher selected four other school sites in order to include multiple perspectives and experiences from each school site. Conducting research at the school site the researcher works at as well as four other school sites helped give a greater understanding on the impact that rigorous curriculum has on educators and students across a variety of school sites. Although the researcher is passionate about this topic, careful steps were taken to ensure that the opinion of the researcher was not conveyed during the data collection process. The interview questions and survey questions were reviewed by the researcher's thesis peers and professor to ensure that the questions being asked were neutral. In addition, by identifying personal bias before beginning data collection, the researcher was carefully attuned to alternative viewpoints about curriculum to ensure that these perspectives were not overlooked.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data from the surveys were tabulated by survey questions and their respective aggregated responses compiled as percentages. Each interview was audio recorded and carefully transcribed by the researcher. Each response for each interview question was then entered into a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet was used to compare and contrast interview responses for each interview question, focusing on coding for repeated words and concepts. A separate spreadsheet was used to compare and contrast survey responses for each question, focusing on coding for repeated words and concepts. In order to be as accurate as possible, after analyzing each spreadsheet separately, the researcher compiled all interview and survey answers into one spreadsheet. The researcher then analyzed the data for a third time to see if similar

themes or patterns existed in the codes were revealed. The analysis revealed three central themes from the data.

Reliability and Validity

While analyzing the data, the researcher kept in mind that this is not a generalization of all teachers who work with rigorous curriculum and that this is a glimpse into a specific population of teachers telling their individual experiences and perspectives. In order to minimize bias due to the researcher's positionality, the interview and survey responses were triangulated in order to examine themes that appeared in both data sources. Through the process of refining the transcribed interview responses and survey responses for a third time, new codes and themes were assigned.

Chapter 4 Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data. First, the findings show that the rigorous curriculum being used had a negative effect on English learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. Curriculum is being chosen without regard for all students but especially English language learner's educational and developmental needs. Compared to native English speakers, English language learners are struggling more with the rigorous curriculum.

Secondly, the findings show that the impact of rigorous curriculum on teachers also depends on how the curriculum is chosen. The way that the curriculum was chosen affected the way teachers perceived and used curriculum in their classrooms. When teachers were actively involved in the process of choosing curriculum, they had a greater sense of efficacy. Yet there is frequently a lack of teacher input and involvement when choosing the curriculum, which in turn affects student learning. Although many of the participants were not able to pick curriculum for their own classrooms, the participants had many suggestions regarding curriculum that could be used and implemented in order to help all their students.

Lastly, the data showed that the rigorous curriculum being used impacted the social and emotional skill development of the students. Participants discussed having less time and less resources to teach their students social and emotional skills when teaching using rigorous curriculum.

The Impact Depends on the Demographic of Students

The amount of impact that the rigorous curriculum has on students depends on the demographic of the students. Most students in transitional kindergarten and

kindergarten are struggling either academically or socially with the rigorous curriculum, but English language learners are being impacted the most. Moreover, some Native English speakers are doing well with the curriculum, while other Native English speakers are still struggling without developmentally appropriate practices and social emotional curriculum.

When asked if participants use rigorous curriculum or play-based learning in their transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, sixty-eight percent of participants responded that they use rigorous curriculum. Only thirty two percent of the participants use a play-based curriculum in their transitional kindergarten or kindergarten classroom.

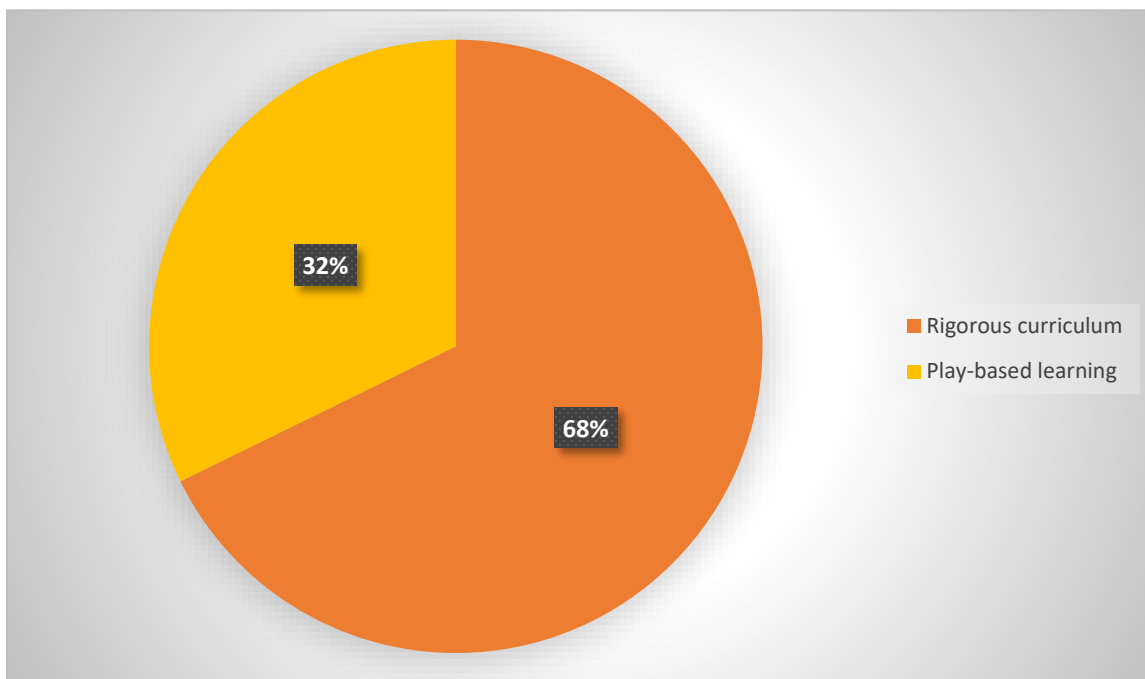


Figure 1. Does the participant's school use rigorous curriculum or play-based learning?

The findings from this research suggest that schools that have a higher demographic of low-income English language learners are struggling more academically with the rigorous curriculum. Six out of the seven interview participants

who mentioned a negative relationship with using rigorous curriculum in their classroom also mentioned the negative relationship English language learners are having with the rigorous curriculum. Through the research, there is a strong correlation between the demographic of the students at the school and how the rigorous curriculum affects the academics of the students.

One participant said that her English language learners are feeling “nervous and jittery” at school. The rigorous curriculum is causing many young English language learners to “hate school”, “have anxiety” as well as “undue stress” around school. Seventeen out of thirty-six participants from the survey and interviews reported that the rigorous curriculum causes students in their classroom to have behavioral issues, undue stress, low self-esteem and anxiety.

Participants from schools that have native English speakers report that the native English speaker students in their class enjoy the academic rigor, love school, and are excited about learning. One participant said that her native speakers are “embracing and are ready to go further” with the rigorous curriculum. This same participant also mentioned that her students that had completed preschool or transitional kindergarten the year before were more equipped and ready for the rigorous curriculum they encountered in her kindergarten class.

The Impact of Curriculum on the Teacher Depends on how the Curriculum is Chosen

The process in which curriculum is chosen seems to directly impact the implementation and success of the curriculum. When curriculum is solely chosen by the principal or district, the way the curriculum is implemented in the classroom is affected.

Five out of the seven interview participants did not have a say in the choice of curriculum they are using in their classrooms. When survey participants were asked how curriculum was chosen for their classrooms, forty-eight percent of participants curriculum was chosen by the district with some input from teachers, twenty-four percent of curriculum was chosen by the districts with no say from the teachers, fourteen percent of the curriculum was chosen by the principal without say from the teachers and fourteen percent of the curriculum was solely chosen by teachers (figure 2). Participants who did not have a say in the choice of their curriculum mentioned that they felt stuck using a curriculum they did not agree with. Participants who did not have a say in curriculum choice also discussed feeling less influential and capable at their teaching site.

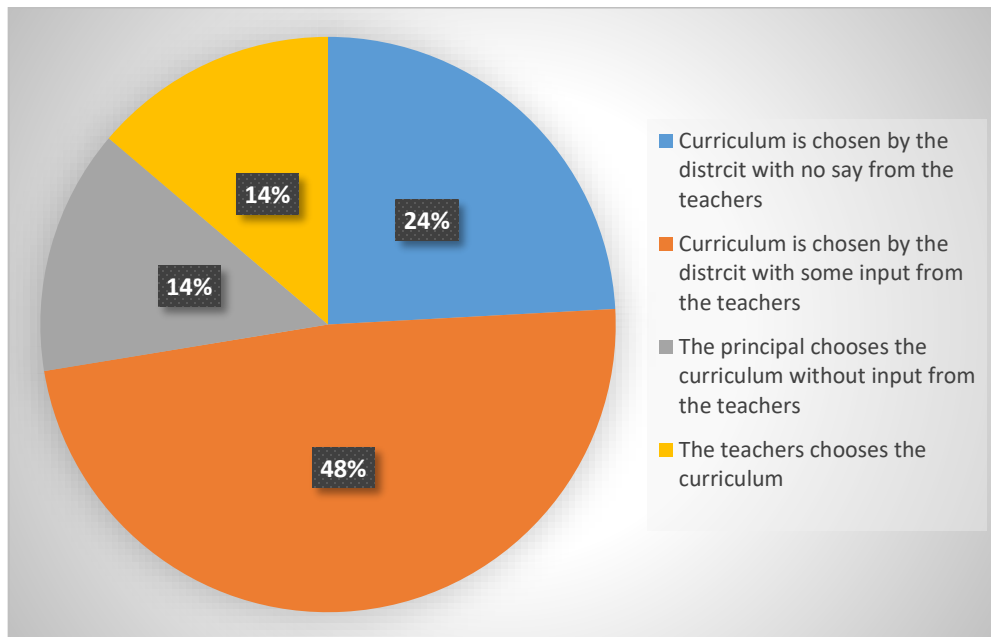


Figure 2. *How is curriculum chosen for the participants classrooms?*

During the interviews, many participants criticized their school districts and principals for not having teachers involved in the process of choosing a curriculum. Participants mentioned that they feel undervalued when they are not included in the process of choosing curriculum. At one interview participant's school, curriculum is usually chosen by the district with little to no input from the teachers. She said that in the future she hopes that the "district allows us to be smart, as teachers..." and that teachers would have more of a say in curriculum choice.

At some of the schools, the lack of leadership and understanding of developmentally appropriate teaching practices directly hinders the teacher's relationship with the curriculum and perception of teaching. One participant said that after teaching for the past twenty four years and feeling confident about what and how she was teaching, she has never felt "less confident" than she does now. She also said that she feels "lost" due to all the different curriculums she must use in her classroom. This participant explained that she has even considered early retirement due to the current stress she is experiencing using rigorous curriculum in her classroom.

One participant, Martha, who teaches transitional kindergarten explained that she feels the pressure to teach rigorous curriculum but instead goes "by what the state says. The states says that transitional kindergarten is a social emotional year for the kids. I also don't think that most of these kids are developmentally ready for academics." Martha said she is getting her students socially and emotionally prepared for kindergarten and beyond by teaching her students how to work in groups and follow directions. She mentioned "paper and pencil is completely developmentally

inappropriate for TK aged students. We know this...If they can't learn because their brains aren't ready, they can't learn. That is just going to make them hate school."

At Martha's school, the principal allows her to use the curriculum she feels is best for her students. Martha acknowledged that the principal "is new to learning about children and development. He has two preschool children. He is having a learning curve too. I think once his kids get in school, he will understand a bit more." Due to the principal's lack of developmental knowledge of transitional kindergarten aged students, there is less pressure from the principal to use a particular curriculum. Due to the lack of principal pressure, Martha expressed that she is "really glad to have the freedom. My style of teaching is kind of organic and I think it is at this age, the kids have a need, you sense the need and you address the need." Martha mentioned that she enjoys using the curriculum she has been provided with because she has been adequately trained and is able to adjust the curriculum in order to meet the individual needs of her students.

When asked how participants feel while teaching the curriculum they currently have, forty-nine percent of participants said that the curriculum is "okay," forty-six of the participants said that they did not like the curriculum and only five percent of participants said that they really enjoy using the

curriculum.

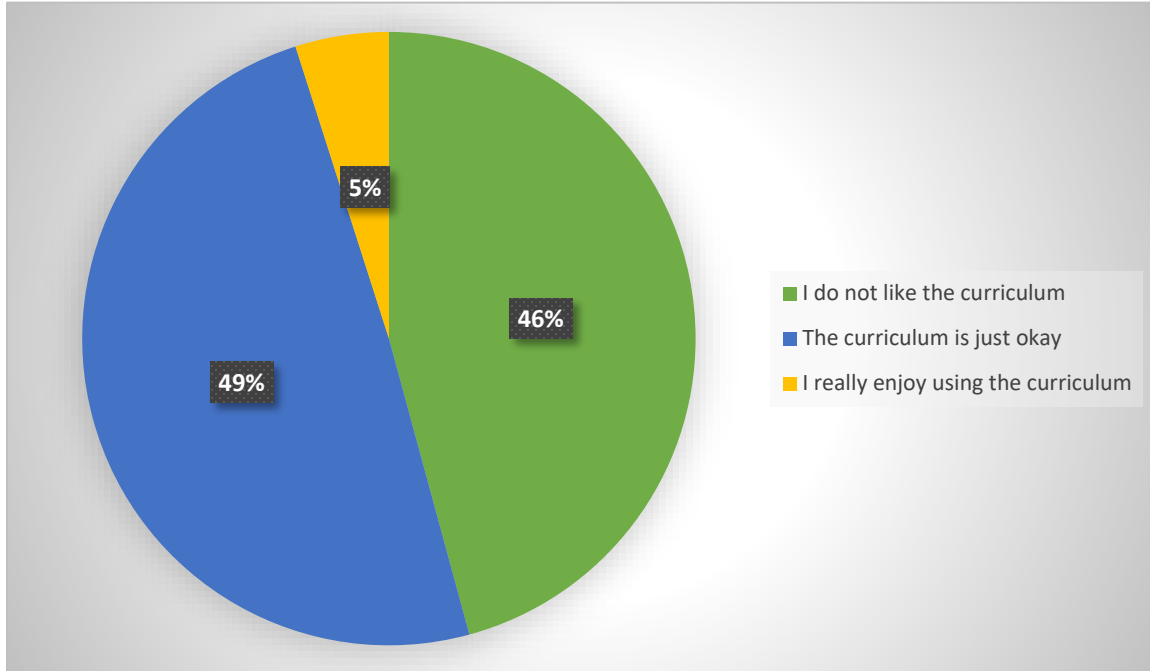


Figure 3. How do the participants feel teaching using the current curriculum?

The overwhelming majority of the participants either said the curriculum was either “okay” or they did not like the curriculum they were currently using. Many participants discussed suggestions on how to change or alter the rigorous curriculum in order to better suit all students. When the participants were asked what they would change with their current curriculum, fifty-five percent mentioned adding more play-based learning and hands-on activities. Although more than half of the participants would like to use more play-based learning in their classroom, sixty-eight percent are currently using a more rigorous curriculum. One participant explained how her students feel using the rigorous curriculum:

The curriculum is mostly worksheets and things to do. Every single time I say we are going to do a worksheet they (students) hate it. They are instantly checked

out and have a bad attitude. Which always makes me feel like I am not doing them justice. Education is not fun for them with paper. That is my biggest complaint. The curriculum is all paper.”

Thirty three percent of participants mentioned that there should be a balance between play-based learning and rigorous curriculum. Participants explained that using more play-based and hands-on learning experiences would help the rigorous curriculum be more developmentally appropriate. One participant said that a balance of play-based learning and rigorous curriculum “reaches more students”.

A few participants expressed that their current curricula is different for each subject matter and that the curricula do not connect or relate. One curriculum suggestion from the participants is that they would prefer a thematic curriculum that incorporates all academic subjects. Some participants also mentioned they would prefer a teacher made curriculum that better addresses the varied demographic of students as well as the developmental needs of each student. All of the participants that mentioned implementing a thematic curriculum in the future are currently using rigorous curriculum with very few developmentally appropriate learning strategies and no play-based learning activities.

Rigorous Curriculum is Impacting Social and Emotional Learning Opportunities

Another major impact of rigorous curriculum is the strain it puts on social and emotional learning time. Thirty-six percent of participants discussed their concern about the lack of time they have to teach their students social and emotional skills due to the rigorous curriculum. One participant mentioned that rigorous curriculum was expecting her “kindergarten students to function throughout the day as fifth graders.”

Out of the seven participants that were interviewed, Martha is the only participant able to teach social, emotional curriculum for most of the day in her transitional kindergarten classroom. When asked to explain what her classroom looks like when she is teaching social emotional curriculum, she said that her “students are helping each other and taking care of each other.” Martha takes into account the social and emotional needs of her students and has a specific social and emotional curriculum she intertwines with other activities for most of the day.

Even though many interview participants said most of their native English speakers are doing well with the curriculum, at the same time, teachers reported that many native English speaking students struggle with the social expectations of the classroom. These students are struggling because the rigorous curriculum lacks developmentally appropriate practices and social emotional learning. When asked if curriculum was developmentally appropriate for students, fifty percent of the participants said that some aspects of the curriculum are developmentally appropriate, twenty-six percent said the curriculum is developmentally appropriate and twenty-four percent said that the curriculum is not at all developmentally appropriate. One survey participant mentioned that “when rigor is pushed in the ways that it often is, it is detrimental to developmentally appropriate practices... often developmentally appropriate practices is put aside for what is more rigorous, which doesn’t benefit the whole child.”

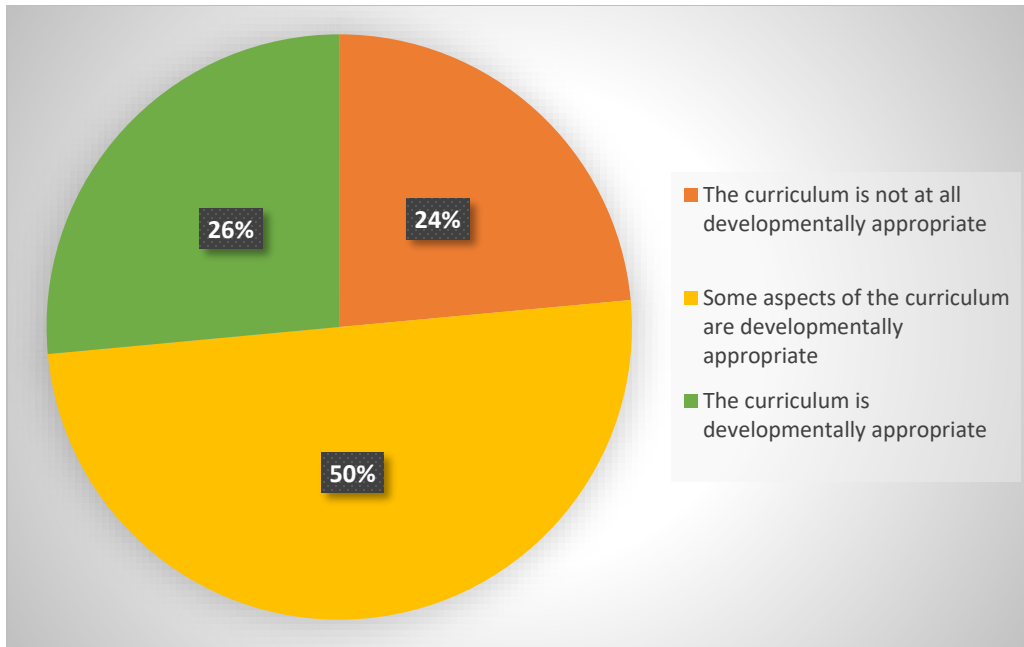


Figure 4. How developmentally appropriate do the participants feel the curriculum is for their students?

English language learners and native English speakers may be struggling for different reasons but they are both still struggling. English language learners are struggling with keeping up academically, as well as socially and emotionally with the rigorous curriculum whereas native English speakers are socially and emotionally struggling with the curriculum. One survey participant said that the rigorous curriculum “doesn’t take into consideration the social emotional needs of my students, in that we have less time to devote to help create well rounded, kind people.” Interview participants mentioned that even when their native English speaking students are able to academically succeed with the rigorous curriculum, they are having behavioral issues as well as not being able to properly develop the social and emotional skills that are needed during transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. One survey participant said that using the rigorous curriculum in her classroom “creates behavior problems where

there should be none, and takes the joy out of learning.” Besides rigorous curriculum often taking precedence over missing social and emotional learning, the participants mentioned that one of the most detrimental aspects of the curriculum was the lack of developmentally appropriate practices and activities.

Chapter 5 Discussion and Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

The findings from this study generated three major themes. Participants reported that the rigorous curriculum is negatively affecting and failing to serve the majority of students, but especially English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. The findings also show that the impact of rigorous curriculum on teachers depends on how the curriculum is chosen. The data suggests that role of teacher-choice in selecting a curriculum affects classroom environment and school performance. Lastly, the rigorous curriculum is impacting the development of social and emotional skills of the students.

Comparison of Findings to the Literature

The existing literature and research shows that teachers are feeling pressured by parents and administrators to use rigorous curriculum that features little to no play-based learning (Campbell, 2015). This was a similar finding throughout the seven interviews and survey data. Teachers that participated in this research discussed the difficulties they experienced with teaching using a rigorous curriculum that has little to no-play based learning.

This study compliments the research concept that rigorous curriculum can have a negative effect on student's self-esteem. If students are already feeling like they are failing due to the developmentally inappropriate standards that are placed on them, their perceptions about school and who they are as learners can be greatly affected (Stipek, 2006). This study concurs with previous researching affirming that teachers are seeing

many of their students feel stressed, anxious and having behavioral issues due to the lack of developmentally inappropriate standards being placed on them (Gottfried et al., 2016).

Although the literature focused more on the importance of play-based learning practices in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, teachers participating in this research study mentioned that social-emotional curriculum was just as important as play-based learning. Participants also mentioned that their students were struggling with the rigorous curriculum mostly due to the lack of social emotional learning opportunities. This is a significant finding because participants mentioned that having a social-emotional curriculum is just as important, if not more important, than having play-based learning practices in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. Rigorous curriculum is having a negative impact on all students because of the lack of social-emotional curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices.

While much of the literature review examined the importance of play-based learning, participants mentioned that their students were struggling with the rigorous curriculum mostly due to the lack of social emotional learning opportunities in the curriculum. The findings from this study indicate that while most students in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten are struggling either academically or socially with the rigorous curriculum, English language learners are being impacted the most. In regards to how rigorous curriculum impacted English language learners, the literature mostly focused on the impact that play-based learning had on English language learners. The existing literature discussed the positive impact that play-based learning had on English language learners. Specifically, Piker (2013) examined the positive effect that play-

based learning had on the language acquisition of English language learners. Piker also discussed the importance of social interactions during play as well as how play helps with developing academic and social skills. The findings from this research study show the negative impact that rigorous curriculum had on the self-esteem and success of English language learners due to the lack of developmentally appropriate learning strategies. Although a majority of the participants discussed the importance of play-based learning in the interview or survey, participants mentioned that their students were struggling with the rigorous curriculum mostly due to the lack of social emotional learning opportunities in the curriculum.

The literature discussed the pressure that teachers feel to teach their students using a rigorous non-play based curriculum but the literature did not discuss the process of how curriculum is chosen and how the process affects teacher perspective. When curriculum is solely chosen by the principal or district, the way the curriculum is implemented in the classroom is affected and teachers lose their sense of efficacy. When teachers are included in the process of selecting a curriculum they are able to gain efficacy and have more positive feelings towards their classroom and profession.

Implications for Practice and Policy

One of the major themes from the data was the importance of social emotional learning for students in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. Social emotional learning can help create a safe space for students to discuss different cultural backgrounds and personal beliefs. This can help students learn how to have empathy,

as well as how to relate to one another. Social emotional learning promotes equity and inclusion inside and outside of the classroom. If more students were able to participate in social emotional learning opportunities in their classrooms, students may foster a greater sense of social justice and participate in social change.

In the past, buying social emotional curriculum for schools has not been a priority or crucial part of the budget. This is in part due to federal government reforms forcing schools to have standardized teaching practices, raised student achievement levels and schools being held accountable for student test scores. At the state and district level, there is often little or no money allotted to social emotional curriculum. State and districts have solely been focusing on the academic aspects of school. It is recommended that funding at the state and district level allow for more money to be allocated towards social emotional curriculum in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms.

Although education at the state level and districts are in favor of rigorous curriculum, in their own classrooms, teachers can take the findings from this research and adapt the rigorous curriculum being used in their classroom. Teachers can implement more developmentally appropriate learning activities as well as incorporate more social emotional learning. Teachers can also add more play-based learning in order to combat the effects of the rigorous curriculum. This will not only positively affect their students learning but will also affect how teachers feel in their own classrooms.

For transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers working with English language learners, adapting the rigorous curriculum is even more important. Using dramatic play alongside rigorous curriculum in the classroom can help promote

language acquisition for English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. Dramatic play scenarios can be created to align with English language art, math, social studies or science themes. Teachers working with English language learners can also add more hands-on academic games in order to help language acquisition and social interactions.

A major finding of the research was the impact that the lack of choice in curriculum had on teachers. When teachers feel dissatisfied or disengaged with the curriculum that has been chosen for them, they often feel burnout, causing them to either change schools or quit the profession. This impacts the sense of community within a school. When a school is dealing with a high rate of teacher turn over, it can cause disrupted relationships between teachers, students and their parents. It may be harder for a school to create a sense of community if they have a high rate of teacher turnover. If teachers were given more choice in the curriculum that is to be used in their classroom, there might be less teacher turnover and more of a chance for schools to create a community.

Limitations/Gap in the Research

There were three major limitations in the findings of this study. The first major limitation was the lack of interview questions discussing social emotional learning. The interview questions that were used in this study focused more on play-based learning. Although participants during the interviews were able to discuss social emotional learning, the survey participants had less of a chance to discuss their experience with social emotional learning due to the structure of the questions. The second limitation in

the study revolves around the limited perspective of the participants. The participants were only able to give the teacher's perspective which created a lack of direct perspective of students as well as the perspective of principals and district leaders.

Finally, the findings from the interviews are not specific to a particular school site but are specific to a geographical area. All of the school sites that participated in this research were from two cities in the northern part of the San Francisco Bay area. The demographic of the interview participants were similar with all interview participants being homogeneous Caucasian, middle-class women. The demographic of the students from the schools that participated in the interviews were also similar. The school sites that participated featured a mixture of mostly Caucasian and Latino students. Most of the Caucasian students from all of the school sites were middle to upper class and many of the Latino students were lower-class English language learners. This may limit the findings and analysis of this project because it only examines two specific demographics of students and does not allow for other student experiences from other demographics to be analyzed.

Implications for Future Research

For future research, it is suggested that there be more research examining how the lack of social emotional curriculum directly affects low income English language learners. It is also suggested that there is more research regarding the principal and superintendent's perspective on rigorous curriculum as well as the process in which principals and districts take when choosing a curriculum. It is important to further research these topics because student as well as teachers are feeling unsuccessful with the current rigorous curriculum.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Government reforms such as No Child Left Behind and Good Start and Grow Smart, have shifted schools from using developmentally appropriate learning practices such as play-based learning and social-emotional development to using rigorous curriculum with a focus on academic skill building. This study examined how the demands of using rigorous curriculum impacts transitional kindergarten and kindergarten educators, as well as how rigorous curriculum impacts student learning experiences. Lastly, this study examined how transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers feel when using rigorous curriculum in their classroom.

When entering transitional kindergarten and kindergarten, students must learn new routines, interact with new peers in new social situations, and learn academic skills. This can be especially hard for students who are English language learners. The findings show that rigorous curriculum is negatively affecting and failing to serve the majority of students, especially English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. Teachers participating in this study reported that their English language learners are feeling stressed, anxious, jittery and unaccomplished because they are not able to access the rigorous curriculum. This can create a low sense of self at school as well as an aversion for education.

Furthermore, the use of rigorous curriculum in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten is also widening the achievement gap between native English speaking students and English language learners. Rigorous curriculum is causing many young English language learners to hate school and have a low sense of self in the classroom.

These students are unable to access the rigorous curriculum due to the lack of developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Rigorous curriculum often lacks a social emotional learning component which also impairs the learning of English language learners in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten.

While some native English speaking students are doing well with the rigorous curriculum, others are still struggling without developmentally appropriate practices and social emotional curriculum. Even though many interview participants said most of their native English speakers are doing well with the academic curriculum, participants also reported that many native English speaking students struggle with social expectations of school. Conclusively, this struggle can be attributed to the lack of emphasis on social emotional learning in today's rigorous classroom. While English language learners and native English speakers may be struggling for different reasons, it is the rigorous curriculum that is the root cause of these issues.

The most compelling and unforeseen finding from the research is that social emotional curriculum is just as important as play-based learning in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. While much of the literature review examined the importance of play-based learning, participants mentioned that their students were struggling with the rigorous curriculum mostly due to the lack of social emotional learning opportunities in the curriculum. Although fifty-five percent of teachers mentioned they would like more time for more play-based learning, they also emphasized the importance of adding social emotional learning into each day.

Educators must understand the impact that rigorous curriculum has on all students in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten. In order for students in

transitional kindergarten and kindergarten to succeed, there needs to be more developmentally appropriate practices for students. This can include incorporating teaching practices that focus on the whole-child, as well as more opportunities for hands-on and play-based learning throughout each day. By adding more of these learning experiences into the classroom, students in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten will have access to a variety of learning approaches to help them succeed in a rigorous curriculum environment. If teachers only have time to add one new component to their classroom, the research shows that teachers would prefer the addition of more social emotional learning time.

This research also aimed to answer the question of how transitional kindergarten and kindergarten teachers feel when using rigorous curriculum in the classroom. The findings show that the impact of rigorous curriculum depends on how the curriculum is chosen. Only fourteen percent of participants answered that they have full control of what curriculum is used in their classroom. This is causing teachers to have negative feelings about their profession as well as a loss of efficacy. Teachers are also feeling discredited and undervalued when their opinion and choice regarding curriculum is not involved in the process of choosing curriculum. These negative feelings directly impact the classroom environment, student performance and the sense of community within a school.

The way the curriculum is chosen is an important component in how teachers feel in their own classrooms and in the classroom environment they create. In order to achieve educational effectiveness, decisions made at the district, state and federal level must consider teacher knowledge and expertise. One way this can be

achieved is by allowing teachers to be involved in the process of choosing curriculum. If more teachers were given an opportunity to choose the curriculum that would be used in their classroom, then teachers would gain more efficacy as well as more positive feelings regarding the profession. This change would also help teachers create a more positive classroom environment and improve student achievement. In conclusion, teacher recommendations should be considered to bring about change with the use and implementation of rigorous curriculum in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. How many years have you worked as a teacher?

2. Does your school use:
 - rigorous curriculum
 - play-based learning
 - other (please specify)

3. How is curriculum chosen for your classroom?

4. Are you able to alter the curriculum if needed? If yes, how do you alter it?

5. How does it feel to teach using the curriculum you are provided?

6. How do you feel the level of rigor affects students learning experiences?

7. Are the instructional strategies and activities that are included in the curriculum developmentally appropriate for your students?

8. How do you feel the level of rigor affects student perceptions about school?

9. If you could change the curriculum that you currently have, would you? If so, what would you change it too? If not, why would you keep it the same?

10. If you could give your district feedback about the curriculum you are provided with, what would you say?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

1. What grade do you teach?
 - A. Transitional kindergarten
 - B. Kindergarten
 - C. Other (specify)
2. What state do you teach in?
3. Does your school use:
 - A. rigorous curriculum
 - B. play-based learning
 - C. other (please specify)
4. How is curriculum chosen for your classroom?
 - A. Curriculum is chosen by the district with no say from the teachers
 - B. Curriculum is chosen by the district with input from the teachers
 - C. The principal chooses the curriculum without input from the teachers
 - D. The teacher chooses the curriculum
 - E. Other (please specify)
5. Are you able to alter the curriculum if needed?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Other (specify)
6. Are the instructional strategies and activities that are included in the curriculum appropriate for your students? Please explain why or why not.
7. How do you feel the level of rigor affects students learning experiences?

8. On a scale from 1 to 5 how developmentally appropriate do you feel your curriculum is for your students? (1 meaning not at all developmentally appropriate, 5 meaning very developmentally appropriate)

9. On a scale from 1 to 5 how do you feel teaching using your current curriculum? (1 meaning you really enjoy it and 5 meaning you do not enjoy using it).

10. If you could change the curriculum that you currently have, would you? If so, what would you change it too? If not, why would you keep it the same?

Appendix C

IRB Proposal



November 21, 2017

Lauren Clough
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Lauren:

I have reviewed your proposal entitled *The Impact of Rigorous Curriculum* submitted to the Dominican University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants (IRBPHP Application, #10631). I am approving it as having met the requirements for minimizing risk and protecting the rights of the participants in your research.

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Randall Hall, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Jennifer Lucko