

# *Playing to Learn is for Grown-Ups, Too! A Summer Graduate Course on Play at a PDS Summer Camp and Teachers Bringing Play Back to Their Classrooms*

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**ABSTRACT:** At the heart of this paper is a well-founded belief in the importance of play in the lives of children; play that leads to social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Teacher educators have the responsibility and opportunity to educate and enlighten in-service and pre-service teachers on the role of play in schools. At our university we offer a graduate level course entitled The Educational Foundations of Play. Conveying the role that play can have in today's classrooms is imperative since many new teachers did not have the opportunity to themselves have a play-based education even in their earliest years in school. Learning about play in a graduate-level course is appropriate as well as honorable, admirable, and worthy; the addition of an opportunity to enact play-based strategies takes it a step further and helps ensure the practices take hold. We had precisely this opportunity through a summer camp for rising K-8 students from the local school district, which grew out of a well-established Professional Development School District partnership. As part of the camp, the Play class, and other college of education courses, were taught on-site and included daily opportunities to interact with children and enact a play-based curriculum. Children thoroughly enjoyed the play-based sessions and graduate students appreciated the opportunities to practically apply play strategies and engage firsthand with theories of play. While this was positive and could be painted as a win, our work was not done. We went on to challenge the graduate students, a mix of beginning teachers and recently certified teachers, to bring play back to their classrooms in the fall. Enacting play in a summer camp was one-thing; implementing these same strategies in a public-school classroom would require dedication and creativity. Multiple teachers took up this challenge to bring play back to the classroom. The work of two teachers working in PDS-affiliated schools will be highlighted for their valiant attempts to uphold the notion that children learn through play and that teachers can find a variety of ways to facilitate this process. Recommendations for other teachers and teacher-educators are offered based on our findings that have implications for play, practicum experiences, and graduate coursework in PDS work.

*Nine Essentials Addressed: Essential #4: A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; Essential #5: Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants*

At the heart of this paper is a well-founded belief in the importance of play in the lives of children; play that leads to social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. As teacher educators we have the responsibility and opportunity to educate and enlighten in-service and pre-service teachers on the role of play in schools. At our university we offer a graduate level course entitled The Educational Foundations of Play. Conveying the role that play can have in today's classrooms is imperative since many new teachers did not have the opportunity to themselves have a play-based education even in their earliest years in school.

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opportunity to enact play-based strategies takes it a step further and helps ensure the practices take hold. We had precisely this opportunity through a summer camp for rising K-8 students from the local school district, which grew out of a well-established Professional Development School (PDS) District partnership. As part of the camp, the Play class, and other college of education courses, were taught on-site and included daily opportunities to interact with children using innovative pedagogical strategies. Working with children in the camp as a component of the class made it possible to enact a play-based curriculum.

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apply play strategies and engage firsthand with theories of play. While this was positive and could be painted as a win, our work was not done. We went on to challenge the graduate students, a mix of beginning teachers and recently certified teachers, to bring play back to their classrooms in the fall. Enacting play in a summer camp was the first step; in order to implement these same strategies in a public school classroom would require dedication and creativity. Multiple teachers took up this challenge to bring play back to the classroom. The work of two teachers working in PDS-affiliated schools will be highlighted for their valiant attempts to uphold the notion that children learn through play and that teachers can find a variety of ways to facilitate this process. Recommendations for other teachers and teacher-educators are offered based on our findings that have implications for play, practicum experiences, and graduate coursework in PDS work.

Case study methodology was utilized in this study as it provided the best method to tell the stories surrounding the study. From the onset of this project the stories of the project were meant to be shared with other teachers and teacher educators. These others may find encouragement or reinforcement for similar practices. Stake (1994) iterates this purpose in stating, “We cannot be sure that a case telling its own story will tell all or tell well, but the ethnographic ethos of interpretive study, seeking out emic meanings held by people within the case, is strong (p. 237). Secondly, an interpretive case study allowed for the possibility of exploring diverse issues related to the experiences of the graduate students and teachers. The findings from this study are complex issues that are not easily identifiable or explainable. Case studies were the best method to explore and interpret the experiences of the participants.

## Play, Play and Learning, Play’s Diminishing Role, Teachers that Didn’t Play in School, the Value of Play

As stated above, the importance of play in the lives of young children is known to be critically important to their healthy development (Ginsburg, 2007). Children play to understand the world around them and in the process learn about themselves and others (Blasi, Hurwitz, & Hurwitz, 2002; Jarrett, 2002; McElwain & Volling, 2005). Through play children learn about themselves and others (Elias & Arnold, 2006; Zins et al., 2004). Play leads to learning in all areas of development and appropriately is a natural activity to humans and all mammals and is engrained in our biology (Gray, 2013). Play is intrinsically motivating for children. Through play children are able to take control of their lives; in a world in which children have little power, play offers the opportunity for children to assume and experiment with power (Lee & Recchia, 2008); to negotiate their reality; and to create imaginary worlds that help them cope with their reality. Play allows young children to take on their fears and create or explore a world they can master by, for example, creating fantasy heroes that conquer their deepest fears (Milteer

& Ginsburg, 2012). The beneficial role of play in the education of young children is deep rooted; philosophers and theorists from Socrates to Pestalozzi to Piaget have proclaimed the benefits of play for centuries (Pelligrini & Galda, 1990; Piaget, 1962; Whitebread et al. 2012).

Play benefits learning across the board; for the purposes of this study the benefits of play on language and literacy development as well as social and emotional development will be reviewed. Studies abound on the impact that socio-dramatic or make-believe play has on children’s development in a variety of areas, but especially in the area of literacy. Bodrova (2008) synthesizes some of the benefits of play from a Vygotskian perspective. According to Bodrova, and based on the play theories of Vygotsky and Elkonin, make-believe play has many benefits including: being a source of development; a prerequisite to higher mental functions; a way of developing new forms of thinking and imagination; a tool for developing self-regulation; a prerequisite for literacy learning; a way in which students can develop metalinguistic awareness; and a tool for understanding authentic purposes for reading and writing. These are significant benefits that can be developed through play, and are worthy of attempts to consider the ways in which play may be more often used in academic settings.

Play is a key factor in the development of cognitive functioning and language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical studies support the connection between children’s play and language abilities (Holmes, Romeo, Ciraola, & Grushko, 2015; Kohm, Holmes, Romeo, & Koolidge, 2016; Mottweiler & Taylor, 2014). Holmes et al. (2015) in a study of 56 preschool-aged children, found strong positive connections between play and language; specifically that “children’s engagement in pretend play promoted increased verb use in storytelling...[and that] children used more adjectives and prepositions in group pretend play” (p. 8). Other research specifically focuses on play and language development of English Language Learners (ELL). Bannerjee, Alsaman, and Alqafari (2016) directly link the achievement gaps that are often seen in English Language Learner (ELL) populations to the impacts that high-quality sociodramatic play has on their language and literacy development. The authors identify several ways in which teachers can promote play for ELLs, including adults being facilitators for play, and “enhancing the ‘language richness’ of the environment” (Bannerjee et al., 2016, p. 301). Similarly, Massey (2013) stated, “In designing guided play to address concrete and abstract language, early childhood teachers create an environment in which children can practice oral language skills through the medium of play” (p. 128).

The acquisition of social skills is an essential step in the development of young children that has lasting implications for the quality of social experiences throughout life (Denham & Weissberg, 2004; Duncan et al., 2007; Feldman & Eidelman, 2009). Interactions with peers in a play-based environment establish positive social communication exchanges that will shape a young child’s experiences with the social world throughout their lifetime (Jamison, Forston, & Stanton-

Chapman, 2012). Play pedagogies are multifaceted and contribute to the social development of children.

Children's play in and out of the classroom has also been shown to lead to increases in social development. Newton and Jenvey (2011) in a study of 85 preschool-aged children in Australia found that the opportunity for social interaction that play provides is associated with social competence; previous research corroborates this claim (Howes, 1988; Howes & Matheson, 1992). Self-regulation is an important concept in the social and emotional development of children and can be envisioned beginning with control of arousal and modulation of sensory stimulation in the earliest months of life and gradually extending to compliance of impulse control in the toddler years (Kopp, 1982). Children begin using cognitive strategies to control emotions and impulses, learn to act in accordance with social and moral standards, and progress in directing and monitoring their thinking and behavior in pursuit of self-chosen goals and the expectations of others (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002; Luria, 1961; Mischel, 1996; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Providing and allowing for play in classrooms helps lead to this self-regulation. In play Vygotsky observed, "At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rule of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game he acts counter to what he wants...[achieving] the maximum display of willpower" (Vygotsky 1967, p. 14). Researchers have demonstrated that children become competent with peers when they engage in increasingly complex play sequences with them (Howes & Matheson, 1992; Rubin, Chen, McDougall, Bowker, & McKinnon, 1995). The opportunity to play in a classroom setting influences the self-regulatory capabilities of children.

Despite a corpus of research confirming the benefits of play (Becker et al., 2014; Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011), we see a decrease in the amount of time young children have to play in school. Miller and Almon (2009) discuss findings of a decline in play through nine studies conducted in New York and Los Angeles kindergarten classrooms. Specifically, in a Los Angeles study, "25 percent of the teachers surveyed said there was no time at all for free play in their kindergartens" (Miller & Almon, p. 18). They also found that only 30 minutes of play or "choice time" was incorporated into each day due to the increase of test preparation and literacy and math instruction. While some of this "choice time" is described by teachers as play in one of the studies, this block of time is actually "teacher-directed and involve(s) little or no free play, imagination, or creativity" (Miller & Almon, p. 18). The lack of play opportunities has negative consequences for children's learning potential; it also has health consequences. According to Gray (2013), "Over the past half century or more we have seen a continuous erosion of children's freedom to play and, corresponding with that, a continuous decline in young people's mental and physical health" (p. 6). Children's opportunities to play both in and out of school has decreased and with that are the aforementioned opportunities to build

language skills and at the same time decreases in children's mental and physical health.

Play has been shown to benefit children's development yet its prevalence in schools is decreasing. Chistensen and Kelly (2003) provided an insightful look at what they called the "expulsion" of play from schools, without the consideration of the benefits, specifically in the area of literacy that play might provide. One of the important points that the authors make is that "it is a mistake to abandon high-level dramatic play as an instructional strategy for literacy learning" (p. 528). The authors note the misconception that play is often defined by "random, capricious exploration that is pleasant for children and occurs naturally" (p. 528). This type of play is not what the authors advocate for increasing. Alternatively they promote student engagement in "high-level dramatic play," that leads to benefits linked to language, cognitive, and social development. (p. 528). While these authors almost disregard free-play, Gopnik (2011) states that children's free play is important to consider and that creativity is enhanced when children are given the opportunity to explore objects rather than being directly instructed as to what to do. In our view both types of play are beneficial for their respective reasons.

Teachers educators are in an opportune position to be advocates for the value of play in early childhood and elementary classrooms. We are not alone in this call, Dickey et al. (2016) state that "advocacy efforts for putting play back into schooling are crucial" (p. 117). When working with millennials there is a dilemma that must be addressed. Many students passing through our ECE program did not have the experience of a play-based classroom. Asking teacher candidates to enact strategies they do not observe in the classroom or to ask them to do the opposite of what is happening is a dilemma for our work in teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2014). We have frequently experienced this problem and often hear, "When are the children going to learn something/when is the teacher going to teach the children something?" after observing a play-based classroom.

The generation of students in our program has been directly influenced by policies such as NCLB and Race to the Top, which disproportionately emphasize direct instruction, test preparation, and standardized testing (Milteer, Ginsburg, Council on Communications and Media Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2012). Our work as teacher educators is increasingly difficult, as our candidates have become distanced from the play-based classroom we are professing. We concur with Ryan and Berg (2014) who claim that without more attention to teacher learning about play, the possibility of advocating for and including play in early childhood programs, and using play as a site for challenging and addressing issues of inequity, will increasingly become limited. As teacher educators that advocate for play, the above research justifies our inclusion of play in the curriculum for young children and specifically their language and social and emotional development.

## Our PDS Partnership as Context for a Course on Play The Play Class, the Play Practicum, Camp DIVE, Our PDS, On-site Learning

The PDS partnership in our local district grew from one school in 2009 to all 19 schools in the district in 2011, with the creation of the Professional Development School District (PDS). Each semester in our PDS more than 500 pre-service teachers enter public schools in the district to gain field experience and attend classes, just like the PK-12 students are doing across the hall. More than a dozen instructors and professors from the College of Education walk the halls alongside students, teachers, and other educators. Faculty members spend much of their time in the schools rather than solely at the university, teaching courses and providing support for the school community. The benefits of clinically based partnerships and the priority of teacher preparation programs to include rich, clinical experiences is undisputed (AACTE, 2018; AACTE, 2010; NCATE, 2010)

Camp DIVE originated as an off-shoot of the PDS and is a partnership between the Caring County School District, the University of Teachers College of Education, and the Coffee-Caring County community. Camp DIVE has multiple-interconnected and complimentary purposes. It provides an engaging and enriching summer experience for rising kindergarten through eighth grade students to help combat summer slide. *Summer slide* refers to summer learning losses that researchers have documented by noting that students' fall achievement test scores tend to be markedly lower than the scores they achieved a few months earlier during the previous spring (Cooper et al., 1996). Cooper et al. also concluded that the summer slide has a particularly harmful effect on poor children's reading achievement. Additionally, Camp DIVE gives university students the opportunity to complete coursework that includes hands-on experience working with children and youth from the community. At Camp DIVE university students and K-8 students:

- Discover their potential
- Inquire about the world
- Voice their ideas
- Explore their community

Camp DIVE is only a few years old; it has already become a rich site of opportunity for students, educators, and community partners. The camp duration is 4-weeks, Monday-Friday and follows a typical school schedule. All coursework affiliated with Camp DIVE included working directly with children by grade level who were grouped into K-2, 3-5, and 6-8 grade bands. Although the university students involved with the camp originate from various disciplines, it gives future teachers an idea of what education can be when one is not encumbered by standards and testing.

We believe that teachers and teacher candidates need opportunities to grapple with the ideas and ideals of teaching; to learn and explore new techniques and strategies; and most

importantly have the opportunity to experiment with new strategies, styles, and/or techniques. With the surge in attention to clinical practice (AACTE, 2018, 2010; NCATE, 2010) we see preservice teachers from our program having multiple and extended opportunities for field placements/practicum experiences. The PDS is this place; a place where individuals from the university and school district share a commitment to innovative and reflective practices by all participants. Darling-Hammond (2014) says that effective PDS partnerships help create school environments for teaching and teacher training that "support advances in knowledge by serving as sites where practice-based and practice-sensitive research can be carried out collaboratively by teachers, teacher educators, and researchers" (p. 553).

It is in the field where the rubber hits the road. Many will nod their heads in agreement with the oft-stated mantra from teacher candidates that they learn the most from their field experiences. The dilemma we as teacher educators face is when the pedagogies we want candidates to learn are not being observed or demonstrated in their field experiences. Linda Darling-Hammond (2014) partially addresses this same concern stating:

One of the perennial dilemmas of teacher education is how to integrate theoretically based knowledge that has traditionally been taught in university classrooms with the experience-based knowledge that has traditionally been located in the practice of teachers and the realities of classrooms and schools (p. 551).

Darling-Hammond (2014) goes on to state, "It is impossible to teach people how to teach powerfully by asking them to imagine what they have never seen or to suggest they 'do the opposite' of what they have observed in the classroom" (p. 553). In response to Darling-Hammond, we highlight our work and suggest a model for doing similar work (Burns et al., 2017).

It was evident from the beginning of the camp that this was a beneficial experience and one that allowed for the graduate students to enact the theories and practices they were learning about. Comments from university students involved with Camp DIVE demonstrate its initial success:

- Camp DIVE was an extraordinary experience! I have never enjoyed teaching so much!
- Together we played, laughed, and tried many new things! We even got to slide down a hill in a student made spaceship! I certainly cannot wait to go back next year!
- Camp DIVE is a place where everyone can succeed! Each student brought in a new, valued personality that created a classroom community filled with inspiration and learning!
- The students really came with excitement each and every day which opened the door to many new experiences for all of our students and teachers!

PDS partnerships like Camp DIVE allow for innovation. Innovative practices occurred as a result of the freedom and flexibility for an engaging and appropriate practicum given to the university faculty. Unlike the public school classrooms, pacing guides, mandated curriculum, or standardized assessment



did not inhibit the programming. Providing classroom teachers with summer graduate coursework with accompanying practicum opportunities is a promising practice in our partnership, one which allows teachers a safe space to experiment with innovative pedagogies.

## The Play Class

While there were a variety of courses offered to university students, our course was for graduate students pursuing a master's degree in Early Childhood Education. The vessel for experiencing this "hands-on education, experimentation, and innovation" took the shape of a course called "Educational Foundations of Play."

The course began with the instructor and graduate students exploring scholarly research to better understand the role of play in learning, the different types of play, and the history of play in schools—including its apparent disappearance over time. Throughout the course and accompanying practicum, graduate students explored theories of play as well as strategies to engage children in play. In doing so the graduate students were able to assemble a "play pedagogical toolkit" (Ryan & Berg, 2014, p. 205). This toolkit "helps teachers to navigate competing definitions and purposes of play in the curriculum, informing their responses and actions in the classroom (Ryan and Berg, p. 205).

A major benefit of teaching this class at Camp DIVE is that it allowed the graduate students direct interactions with children. After the initial overview of the importance of play, the graduate students then moved into the role of instructors for K-2 play-based classes at Camp DIVE. Appendix A illustrates the class schedule showing that the graduate students had two-hours each day to plan and implement play in their classroom. This afforded them the opportunity to work directly with children in a familiar but relaxed setting to investigate the nuances of play. A wide variety of materials were available to the graduate students to in turn use with the children. These included markers, tempera paint, water-color paint, brushes, crayons, pens, pencils, chalk, pastels, papers, children's literature from a variety of genres, listening center, clipboards, magnifying glasses, play-dough, clay, clay tools, bubbles, blocks, legoes, math-manipulatives, shells, footballs, kickballs, soccer balls, basket balls, scarves, wind wands, dramatic play clothes, magnets, and other materials and equipment the children or graduate students would request.

NAPDS Essential #4 espouses a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants. A significant takeaway from this study and process is that classroom teachers and teacher candidates need the opportunity to experiment with, sample, and try new techniques; in our case in a summer camp program that was more camp-like rather than school-like. It's one thing to learn about the opportunities for social and emotional development that a play-based class affords but quite another to actually provide children these opportunities and see first-hand this development happening. This allowed

the graduate students to explore and discover the theory to practice connection. Examples included exploring the merits of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and Mildred Parten's Stages of Social Play (Gardner, 1993; Parten, 1932). Darling-Hammond (2014) concurs that such practices are "especially educative when they are followed by systematic reflection on student learning in relation to teaching and accompanied by feedback, with opportunities to retry and continue to improve" (p.552).

The ability to teach a class on the Educational Foundations of Play in a camp setting was crucial to its success. Previously this course was taught as a "traditional" university course; it was held at the university and included many scholarly readings on the topic of Play, numerous opportunities for discussion and debate, and culminated in a term paper on the importance and role that play has and can have in education. A slightly modified version of the course included multiple opportunities for students in the class to engage in play in an attempt to re-discover the feelings and power of play as an adult. We found 'dramatic' success in teaching this course in the context of a play-based curriculum with and for young children which afforded graduate students the opportunity to practice and refine play pedagogies and observe first-hand children's experiences in a play-based classroom.

The graduate students overwhelmingly enjoyed and appreciated learning about play and having the opportunity to implement strategies with children. A sampling of comments illustrates this:

- Having the opportunity to meet, then practice the theories we were going over in practice was exactly right for the content we were covering in this course.
- I believe one of the best parts of this course was that we were able to take what we learned and implement it into Camp DIVE. This gave us an opportunity to see the benefits first hand.
- I loved that we were able to work with Camp DIVE and learn through hands on activities and playing with the kids.
- This structure of this class was perfect! I loved being able to meet for an hour and then have time to practice playing with the students. I learned so much from being able to practice what we were learning!
- Yes, I believe Camp DIVE was essential in order to really dive deep and explore play topics. Discussing them in a class setting is one thing. However, being able to carry out and implement this into a real life setting is so much better.

The experience of learning about the benefits of play coupled with opportunities to enact, observe, and experiment with a play-based approach with children at Camp DIVE was a powerful learning experience for our students. As teacher educators we realized the biggest obstacle lay ahead, will these play-based strategies that these teachers and graduate students

embraced during the camp make their way back to the classroom?

## The Charge and Challenge to Bring Play Back to Your Classroom, The Classroom Research, Inquiry

### Investigating the Role of Play in the Elementary Classroom: Teacher Inquiries

Implementing play-based strategies during Camp DIVE proved successful. The challenge for the graduate students, a mixture of beginning teachers with 3-5 years of teaching experience and newly certified teachers, was to bring play back to the classroom. As the instructor of the course it was clear that the biggest obstacle laid ahead, will these play-based strategies that these teachers and graduate students embraced during the camp make their way back to the classroom? In one of our final discussions as a class the teachers were presented with the dilemma of their school and county demands that included scripted curriculum, pacing guides, assessments, and overall lack of time to allow for play in their classrooms. They were also prompted to reflect on the learning, enjoyment, and engagement that the campers made during their time at Camp DIVE. And finally they were asked to reflect on their own engagement in providing and engaging play experiences. By and large the teachers and graduate students embraced and valued play. The teachers and graduate students were charged to be advocates for the best interests of children to make an effort, no matter how small, to bring play to their classrooms.

While many of the participants from the Play class brought play back to their respective classrooms, here we will focus on two cases. Embodying the call from Darling-Hammond (2014) to bring theory into practice, two classroom teachers that took the Play course went on to create pilot studies that investigated the roles that pedagogies of play could have when working with their own students. These two teachers taught at separate schools in our PDS. In taking up the charge of implementing play pedagogies in the elementary classroom we seek to illustrate how a PDS's might confront current issues and trends and exemplify a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice. As teachers and teacher educators we wish to instill and foster in pre-service and in-service teachers a healthy sense of purposeful advocacy on behalf of all children and families.

As important as being able to try out new techniques during Camp DIVE was the ability to implement these approaches in 'regular' classrooms. Here we want to underscore the value of the PDS partnership and the shared commitment to Essential #4. The two case studies presented below were written by teachers from schools within our PDS. The support provided by the course instructor, who was also the professor-in-residence at the school of one of the studies, definitely played a role in the design and implementation of the study. Also helpful was the support and buy-in of a building level principal who had been involved

in PDS-work since the opening of this particular school as a PDS six years prior. This collaboration and commitment to innovation within the PDS was vital to the completion of the action research conducted by these classroom teachers and graduate students, all of which epitomize essential #4.

### Study #1- Language Development and Play

This research project investigated the impact of focused play experiences on students' receptive and expressive language in a kindergarten classroom and asked whether focused play experiences could yield a measurable growth in receptive and expressive language. The classroom teachers and researchers used district-administered WIDA ACCESS (ACCESS for ELLs, n.d.) test data and classroom observations as metrics to analyze the impact play might have on language development. Due to scoring and reporting changes between the pretest and posttest our plan to analyze potential growth was not possible.

The classroom had 16 students, 15 of whom were ELL students, a classroom teacher, a paraprofessional, a student teacher, a practicum student, and many times an ESOL teacher as well. All students in the classroom participated in the play-based activities in this study, however only ESOL student data was considered.

To give voice to the classroom teacher, the following description and rationale for the study is in her voice:

During the summer of 2016 I participated in the Camp DIVE program, specifically in a class which explored the educational role of play in the classroom. This class was unique in that it allowed the participants the opportunity to observe students as they played, and to engage in that play with the students. There were no standards or objectives that were a requirement of the class, which allowed us to really give the campers a great deal of ownership and freedom in how they wished to spend their time. Through this class, I learned that even older elementary students could benefit from this time, as well as the fact that there were invaluable social and emotional lessons that were being learned through the students' experience.

Seeing how valuable this experience could be for students, I began to wonder how something like this could be integrated into a classroom where there were standards and requirements that would have to be met. After talking about this with Dr. Synonym, it led to the idea of focused play experiences, or play-based lessons that would be focused on standards that the students were required to meet. Students would participate in choice-based activities that would all be designed to give them opportunities to explore science and social studies standards, and allowed them to play. An example would be in our discussion of space, students had the choice of a dramatic play center where they could be astronauts, a play dough center where they could make the shapes of the moon, and an art center where they could recreate star pictures.

As we focused on this play-based learning, it became evident that this would give students an increased number of opportunities to communicate, which was especially valuable for our English Language Learners. This was something I felt was

a huge success for this project, because it kept students from watching videos and doing worksheets and gave them built in time to communicate with those around them. The learning was also much more hands on than it had been in these subjects for me in the past. While providing these students with these opportunities was much more time consuming and labor intensive, it was worth it to see students engaged in the subjects we were exploring. The adults in the room also enjoyed these times when students were able to participate in focused play experiences as compared to the traditional science and social studies lessons. It was truly more fun for all of us.

It was challenging to develop new and engaging activities every week, and often there were units that did not lend themselves to this format. However, on weeks when we participated in lessons that did not allow students to play, I often felt like something was missing. Time and materials were also a challenge in implementing these activities. It was always beneficial for students to have a good deal of time to engage in the centers, but often the time for science and social studies get cut short. The last challenge was found in data collection. The methods we used to collect data in the classroom were not perfect in that a person was assigned a specific student and was asked to note any time that student spoke. The data collector was also asked to note how much the student spoke (a single word, several sentences, etc), and to whom. In a classroom with many other students and bustling with activity, it is easy to miss a few things that are spoken here and there. We also had aimed to look at how the project impacted ACCESS for ELL scores, but were unable to compare the scores due to a change in the administration and score calculation for this test that year.

The PDS partnership between my school and the University of Teachers played a large part in making this project work. Participating in the Educational Roles of Play class through university was a springboard into the project. Dr. Synonym, our Professor-in-Residence, was the instructor for that class and provided an opportunity for me, along with several other graduate students, to earn credit for the project as an independent study class. This allowed us the time and resources to take this project from just an idea and to really attempt to see it through. Having other graduate students participate allowed us to do more data collection, and to have more people's perspectives on how to document the project more thoroughly. Without the PDS partnership, I may have attempted to implement some of the ideas I learned in the Role of Play class, but I would not have been able to create anything as impactful or as comprehensive as the project we ended up implementing.

Throughout the project, we examined and discussed how much the students were speaking to one another during these activities. Overall, the discussion amongst myself and the other grad students was about how much more the students were speaking, especially to one another, when engaged in these play-based activities rather than traditional science and social studies lessons. There seemed to be more language being used by students, and their speech tended to be in longer phrases and sentences rather than shorter responses to a teacher.

While there may not be testing data available to demonstrate the benefits for these students, I believe that students benefited from this experience in several ways. The first benefit came from the opportunity to have freedom and choice in how they would spend this part of the day. Even in Kindergarten, students are given less and less choice during their school day. This opportunity allowed students to think about things that they would do, sometimes make plans about their play, and problem-solve in how they would go about completing that activity. Another benefit came in the increased opportunity for social problem solving. For example, when the activities were teacher directed, there were generally enough materials for all students provided. However, in our focused play experiences, there were not enough materials in all centers for all students to participate. Therefore, students would have to make figure out solutions for how the materials might be allocated, or who might participate in that center first, while the other student would participate afterward. While teachers were present to facilitate this problem solving, students were faced with different challenges than they would be faced with during traditional lessons. Lastly the students benefited in that the classroom in general felt like a more creative place. This group of students specifically would carry creativity into their interactions with each other and with manipulatives throughout the day more than other groups I have worked with.

## **Study #2- Social and Emotional Development, Student Engagement and Play**

This research project investigated how daily playtime in a second grade classroom the engagement and social and emotional development of children. The classroom had 22 students. The classroom teacher's self-reported observations demonstrate the positive impact of this study. This study exemplifies and illustrates how the Camp DIVE experience provided a scaffold that gave this teacher the confidence and desire to implement an hour of play everyday.

To give voice to the classroom teacher the following description and rationale for the study is in her voice:

The Play Class at CAMP Dive truly changed my thinking about free play and the effects it can have on children at any age. Before beginning this class, I was a second grade teacher, adamant about staying on a schedule, having a quiet room, and having a very structured environment where every last minute was planned out in terms of lesson plans. There was very little playtime or movement happening in my classroom. Instead we were focused on staying busy with worksheets or apps on technology that helped the students grow academically. As the year went on, this grew boring and repetitive. Students and teachers were becoming tired of the same routine that was filled with memorization and little hands on learning. Something had to change but we just didn't know how to fill that hour of space that was called ELT (Extended Learning Time).

Following that year, I engaged in the Play Class at CAMP Dive and my thoughts on children playing in a classroom

completely changed. In just a few short weeks I grew to love the “controlled chaos” that occurred in our CAMP Dive classroom. Day after day the students were actively engaged in something they enjoyed. With that being said, they learned social emotional skills without even knowing. There weren’t worksheets or tests, but there was laughter, engagement, and learning still occurring. In addition, there was still structure and rules that I felt would be hard to implement. But instead, the students respected the rules and followed them regularly because of the fun and freedom they had in their classroom. Students were constantly engaged in dramatic play, writing activities, art, and manipulatives which allowed them to learn for themselves how to actively participate in a social environment, how to make choices, and the many academic standards that fell into the games they played. The few short weeks that I spent with a mixed aged classroom, with the freedom to play and learn, led me to make drastic changes in my classroom the following year.

Because of the Play Class, I talked to my principal about the impact of play on children, the social emotional skills they learn, the academic standards that are still being practiced, and how I wanted to implement an hour of play time in my classroom everyday. I was granted approval and I started the first day of school. The first few weeks were very rocky, if I am being honest. My students needed to be taught and needed to practice how to share, how to use their words appropriately for things they wanted or actions they didn’t like, and how to make good choices that would result in good consequences. They also had to practice using their imagination and stepping out of their comfort zone in order to have fun with the different toys in the room.

By the end of the year, our play hour was my favorite time of day. I had 22 students who were able to actively engage with one another and all of the variety of toys they had with minimal issues. In one school year they learned how to share, how to ask to play with one another, how to explain their feelings when someone did something they didn’t like, how to manipulate toys to turn them into a different game, how to play with different genders, how to play with different races, etc. Behavior was a known issue at the school where I worked, and hands down, I confidently say that having an hour of free play, an hour of time to work on our social skills, considerably lowered behavior issues in my classroom. Because of what they learned socially and emotionally during their play time, they were able to transfer that learning into other life situations that made our classroom one that was academically challenging with positive learning behaviors.

Being that I was a new, young teacher at my school, I was very nervous to implement this new hour into our day. I was scared it would cause more behavior problems. I was worried my principal would shut it down because of how loud it would get. I was anxious to see if it would have the same positive outcome that the Camp Dive class showed me it could have. But now a year later, I am forever grateful that I took that step of faith into making a change in my students’ lives. I can confidently say my students that were able to participate in an hour of free play each day are more well rounded students with the social and

emotional skills that it takes to be successful in our academic world in addition to being more imaginative in their young lives.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper serves as an emergent exploration into the possibilities of utilizing the PDS framework to open windows of opportunity for enhanced learning and engagement between teachers, students, districts, and universities. Our early childhood program and our PDS are committed to NAPDS Essential #4, Innovative And Reflective Practice By All Participants. Throughout this study teacher educators, graduate students, classroom teachers, and children were highly involved in innovative practices and reflection. Regrettably we are in a state and time where we play is positioned as an innovation. So too are we deeming innovative the process of action research by classroom teachers to better understand pedagogical interventions. In proclaiming this work we address Essential #5 Engagement In And Public Sharing Of The Results Of Deliberate Investigations Of Practice By Respective Participants.

Teaching the Play class with an accompanying practicum experience for graduate students and teachers at Camp DIVE relates to Darling-Hammond’s (2014) view of effective PDS partnerships as places where collaborative, practice-based research occur between teachers, teacher educators, and research. Using examples from our local PDS, we direct attention towards ways in which practicing teachers can fit play into the regular school day while engaging in their own lines of inquiry. We propose three recommendations based on this PDS-action research-inquiry study.

### Graduate-Level Coursework with Accompanying Practicum

One area of success or potential success gleaned from this study is the utilization of graduate level courses as a springboard for change in schools. This is not new as many if not most graduate teacher educators have been espousing/encouraging their students to go back to their classrooms and use approaches, techniques, and pedagogies they explored in class. Like Burns, et. al. (2017) who sought to address the needs of a school through graduate coursework, our graduate level class was directly connected to a practicum which allowed graduate students and teachers to practice the play pedagogies they were learning.

Camp DIVE proved to be successful as a site of experimentation and innovation for a variety of disciplines involved schools and the education of children. Specifically for the Play class, it allowed for graduate students and teachers to engage in unfamiliar pedagogies in a safe, risk-free setting. The enactment of engagement cannot be underscored enough. In the process of doing, the graduate students and teachers came to realize, see, and better understand play’s role in learning and ultimately giving these two teachers the confidence to enact play in their own classrooms. Simply discussing and providing graduate students and teachers with theories of play and



practical strategies to encourage play is not satisfactory. Allowing and providing space to embody pedagogies of play is a positive takeaway from our experience. This is a clear example of bridging the gulf between theory and practice and it occurred as a result of our PDS.

### The PDS Partnership as a “Site” for Experimentation

In this study the PDS framework supported both Camp DIVE as well as the follow-up classroom research undertaken by the classroom teachers. This type of PDS work, situated at the nexus of the university and public schools, is and should continue to be characterized as a rich site for experimentation. This vision of partnerships builds upon and reaffirms the work and writings of Goodlad (1993; 1994) and Holmes (1986). Educational settings are seen not just as pedagogical sites for instruction and enculturation but also as sites in which children construct their own identities, friendships, rules, routines and meanings (Wood, 2014). Children’s play was the focus of the graduate class and subsequent research. The two classroom vignettes shared in this paper specifically inquired about play and its impact on language, social, and emotional development. The importance and value of play cannot be underscored here enough; it is our view that play provides opportunities for children to construct their own identities, friendships, rules, routines, and meanings. While the PDS is this “site” for experimentation, partnerships need to be nurtured by committed school and university-based faculty that are based on trust and mutual benefit.

### Demonstrations of Play Leading to Increased Engagement and Growth

Although play has historical roots its role in schools has become marginalized. Play has numerous benefits to children’s physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Study 1 purposefully aimed at connecting play to the cognitive benefits it may afford children, in this case in the realm of language development. Many advocates of play are being forced to demonstrate play’s importance to learning; here we are not speaking of play’s influence on children’s engagement in classroom activities as in the kindergartners in the play-based classroom were much more engaged in their lessons than the children in the classroom that

was not a play-based. It’s taking it a step further; to demonstrate that the engagement resulting from the play-based activities lead to growth as measured by an assessment. Ryan and Berg (2014) echo this sentiment stating, “policies in many countries now seek to use early education as one means to ensure improved learning outcomes for young children, and this increasing policy oversight has led to a questioning of the purposes of play in the early childhood curriculum (p. 204).

Measuring success in studies like these are like measuring success for PDS partnerships—success is based on how we define the subject of inquiry and what it is we want to know (Dresden et al., 2016). Taken alone, numbers that ask specific quantitative questions, such as the proposed metrics used in the first study, may fail to present an in-depth narrative of what is happening. For example in this study, researchers examined the influence of play on language development used quantitative metrics derived from ACCESS tests as a primary indicator of success. After the national entity that produces the ACCESS test, WIDA, changed the scoring and reporting for test data beginning in 2017, researchers in the first study were faced with the realization that the bulk of their data would become unusable. This forced the teachers to investigate what else was embedded in their study that wasn’t easily quantifiable. Instead of examining a test score to measure a student’s success, the teachers were instead able to engage in dialogue about the successes of students’ learning and how that interacted with the addition of play-based activities. A takeaway from the second study is that beginning classroom teachers often have innovative ideas from their teacher preparation program. Providing these teachers support and encouragement exemplifies the shared commitment to innovative and reflective practices for all participants in a PDS.

Taken together these studies offer a potential model for teacher educators to embed content and pedagogy into practicum experiences for teachers pursuing graduate degrees. We are encouraged, as advocates of play in schools, by the willingness and enthusiasm of teachers to bring play back to the classroom for the benefit of children. Amongst the many innovative ideas floating around in education, teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators ought to re-consider the tried and tested pedagogy of Play. <sup>SUP</sup>

#### Appendix A

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
		Class 10-2:00 On campus at University	Class 10-2:00 On campus at University	Class 10-2:00 On campus at University
@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Field trip 8:00-3:00
@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Class and Prep 9-10:00 With campers 10-12:00	@ Camp DIVE Field trip 8:00-3:00

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