Balancing Play-Based Learning and Academic Expectations in Kindergarten

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Research Context

The Problem

In British Columbia Kindergarten classrooms, teachers are expected to build foundational literacy and numeracy skills while preserving meaningful play opportunities. Children arrive with varied experiences, language development and academic readiness. Curriculum expectations, limited instructional time and the need to collect evidence for Learning Updates make this balance a daily professional decision.

Research Question

How can kindergarten classrooms balance play-based learning with increasing academic expectations?

Theoretical Foundations

Piaget (1952): Children construct knowledge through active exploration, hands-on experiences and opportunities to test their ideas.

Vygotsky (1978): Social interaction, purposeful dialogue and scaffolding allow children to accomplish tasks with support before working independently.

Evidence-Based Recommendations

1. Integrate instruction and guided play

Begin with a brief, explicit model of letter formation, then invite children to construct the letters with playdough. Some children may need a visual example or guided practice; others can independently build and name letters. Observe how they apply the skill, and intervene when play moves away from the intended learning goal.

2. Differentiate pathways

Maintain a shared number sense goal while varying the pathway. One child might match a numeral to a set of objects or a ten-frame; another might compare representations and explain why the quantities are equal. Targeted questions and manipulatives allow children to participate at an appropriate level of challenge.

3. Build shared assessment expectations

Develop common expectations with colleagues and school leaders about what counts as evidence of learning. Combine observations, student conversations and work samples with targeted checks of foundational skills. Share concrete examples with families to explain how play and direct instruction each contribute to progress.

Research Approach

Methodology

This capstone used a thematic literature review of 24 publications. A Thematic Analysis Grid supported comparisons of research purposes, methods, findings and implications (Anderson et al., 2015). Four recurring themes informed recommendations, which were considered alongside examples from my kindergarten classroom. The review did not collect original student outcome data.

24 Publications

4 Themes

3 Recommendations

Four research themes

01 Definitions, purposes and forms of play-based learning
02 Literacy and numeracy development through play
03 Teacher guidance, scaffolding and differentiation
04 Curriculum expectations and assessment practices

Play-Based Learning Continuum

Free play	Guided play	Teacher-directed
Child-led exploration	Child agency + teacher support	Explicit instruction

Increasing teacher direction →

Adapted from Pyle & Danniels (2017).

CENTRAL TAKEAWAY

The goal is not to choose between play and academics, but to connect them through intentional, responsive teaching.

Scan to see full APA references

Key Finding

Play supports academic learning

Research suggests that play can create meaningful contexts for applying early literacy and numeracy skills. In block building, dramatic play or hands-on centres, children use oral language, counting, comparison and problem-solving. The academic value depends partly on the learning opportunities and support available (Pyle et al., 2024; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2022).

Intentional guidance matters

Guided play allows teachers to respond to children's thinking without taking over the activity. During mathematical play, a teacher might model a counting strategy, ask how a child knows two sets are equal, or adjust the task to provide an appropriate challenge (Wullschleger et al., 2023).

Differentiation is essential

A common curricular goal does not require identical activities. Children may demonstrate number understanding by matching objects to numerals, using ten-frames or explaining their reasoning. Flexible materials, prompts and levels of scaffolding help teachers respond to differences in readiness while maintaining high expectations.

Assessment shapes practice

Written products alone may not capture learning demonstrated through conversation, exploration or hands-on problem-solving. Observations and work samples can provide complementary evidence of progress. However, reporting demands and pressure for visible academic products may influence how much time teachers protect for play (Pyle et al., 2018).

Implications & Conclusions

Implementation considerations

Large classes, limited adult support and tight schedules can make sustained observation and individualized guidance difficult. Practical responses include rotating focused observations, preparing accessible materials and planning short, purposeful teaching interactions. School-wide agreement about assessment priorities is also important.

Research gaps

Studies differ in how they define play, describe teacher involvement and measure academic outcomes. These differences limit direct comparisons and make it difficult to prescribe one model for every classroom. Further research should examine longer-term learning, diverse student needs and the conditions that make guided play sustainable.

Conclusion

Balancing play and academic expectations is not a fixed division of the school day. It requires professional judgment about when to teach explicitly, when to scaffold children's exploration and how to recognize learning across both contexts. Intentional planning makes play and foundational skill development complementary.