

Play Workshop: Changing Preschool Teachers' Ideas about Play in the Curriculum

By Tracey Roden and Susan Szabo

Play has lost its central focus in early childhood curriculum for a variety of reasons, and many teachers, parents, and policy makers believe play is a waste of time. Thus, play has slowly decreased in the preschool classroom. However, research has shown that play is important to children's development. The authors discuss a Play Workshop conducted for 18 preschool teachers who learned about the need and purpose of play through experiencing both individual and group play activities. Even though this workshop only lasted 3½ hours, survey results revealed a positive change in these preschool teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward the importance of play and its place in the preschool curriculum.

Play is child's work and supports physical development, social and emotional development, cognitive development, creativity, imagination, and language and literacy development (Brown & Vaughn, 2009; Caplan & Caplan, 1973, Epstein, 2009; Holdaway, 1970; Ramsey, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; White, 2012; Wohlwend, 2009). "Play may seem simple, yet it is profound to a child's development. Play makes learning something that happens naturally and joyfully, when a child laughs and wonders, explores and imagines" (White, 2012, p. 3). Early childhood classrooms are perfect environments for children to engage in play behavior and develop language, social, and cognitive skills through interactions with peers and facilitation by adults. Early childhood programs should provide a fundamental foundation for children's learning and development and are essential to the future achievement of each child. Instilling this foundation of learning and achievement early in a child's educational experiences ensures that he or she is more likely to continue to achieve educational success (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the leading organization promoting best practices in early childhood. Their extensive body of literature regarding research on play suggests strongly that it helps young children develop in the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, language, and literacy domains. However, the age of accountability has led to high-stakes testing, pushed-down curriculum, and widespread criticism from teachers, parents, and policy makers who believe that play is a waste of time—a frivolous activity with no correlation to academic achievement (Ramsey, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009). These beliefs, as well as policies driven by them, have led to replacement of play with tests to measure academic standards. Thus, even though considerable research shows play is important to the development of the whole child, children are spending less to virtually no time at play (Elkind, 2008; White, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study is posited within the play theory, the sociocultural theory, and the cognitive theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that cognitive development occurs within social interactions, and, for children, this happens through play. Many researchers have posited that play is critical to a child's normal development and is how children learn about the world around them, how they learn to think, and how they acquire language (Bruce, 2011; Ginsburg, 2007; Packer, Isenberg, & Guisenberry, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Play can be unstructured or structured and planned. Play can be done by oneself or with others. Nevertheless, play helps children to build the appropriate skills to be ready for school (Ashiabi, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009).

Purpose of Study

The authors agree with the research and believe play is important even though it is under siege (Elkind, 2008; Ramsey, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009). However, in order for play to be added effectively to the curriculum, teachers need to believe in the power of play and its impact on the whole child (Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013).

Accordingly, the first author, a doctoral student and early childhood consultant, was asked to develop and present a Play Workshop for 18 preschool teachers serving in a private, urban preschool. This professional development session lasted 3½ hours, and the preschool teachers learned about the need and purpose of play by engaging in both individual free-time active play as well as cooperative play. The Play Workshop had four purposes for teacher participants:

- 1) to involve them in self-active play to experience its physical, cognitive, social, and emotional benefits;
- 2) to gain insight into what children experience during play;
- 3) to translate what they learned from experiences into more effective practices; and
- 4) to become empowered to narrow the gap between what is known about the importance of play and what is practiced.

The authors were curious to see if engaging in these two types of play would change the opinions of these preschool teachers about play so that they would purposefully include more play activities in their preschool classrooms.

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Methods

The study utilized a pre-postintervention quantitative design. The participants were 18 female preschool teachers ranging in age from 19 to 56 years. Five teachers had more than 10 years of experience teaching preschool-age children. Seven teachers had 5 to 9 years of experience. Four teachers had between 1 to 4 years of experience, and two teachers had less than a year of experience teaching preschool children. Results are not generalizable because the study involved a small sample group from the same school in northeast Texas.

Pre- and Postintervention Survey

In order to determine if the Play Workshop changed the preschool teachers' opinions about play, a pre-postintervention survey, developed by the first author using play research, was given to the 18 teachers who attended the workshop. The survey included 12 questions, and the participants responded using a Likert-scale with a response range of 1-5 (*strongly disagree to strongly agree*).

Workshop Design

The Play Workshop lasted 3½ hours. During the first 45 minutes, the preschool teachers were asked to play as individuals with materials that were found on the tables: beads, buttons, clay, construction paper, clothespins, cork, paint, pipe cleaners, plastic lids, Popsicle sticks, ribbon, string, textured shapes, thread spools, and yarn. At the end of the silent, solo-play period, the preschool teachers were asked to reflect on what they did, what they learned, and what they felt. Their creations were then shared with the whole class.

Next, the teachers were asked to participate in cooperative play with a partner or small group using any and all of the materials found on the tables. This partner-play group also lasted 45 minutes. During this time, the participants had to agree on which materials were used and what was created. At the end of the cooperative play, the preschool teachers were again asked to reflect on what they did, what they learned, and what they felt. Their final pair-creations were then shared with the whole group.

Results

Even though this workshop only lasted 3½ hours, the survey results (see Table 1) revealed a positive change in these preschool teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward including play into the curriculum.

The authors were curious to see if engaging in these two types of play would change the opinions of these preschool teachers about play so that they would purposefully include more play activities in their preschool classrooms.

Table 1

Survey Results

Question		Number and Percent of Likert Ratings				
		1	2	3	4	5
Play promotes inspiration and develops personal strengths for both children and adults.	Pre	1 (6%)	0	5 (28%)	1 (6%)	11 (60%)
	Post	0	0	3 (17%)	0	15 (83%)
Hands-on play, with open-ended materials, connects an individual with earlier times of their lives.	Pre	0	1 (6%)	6 (33%)	3 (17%)	8 (44%)
	Post	0	0	3 (17%)	1 (6%)	14 (77%)
3. Feelings of relaxation, inner peace, and remarkable emotion are typical responses to hands-on play for children and adults.	Pre	0	2 (11%)	5 (28%)	5 (28%)	33% (6)
	Post	0	0	4 (22%)	1 (6%)	13 (72%)
4. Feelings experienced in the play space often move into the players' daily lives.	Pre	0	0	8 (44%)	4 (22%)	6 (34%)
	Post	0	0	1 (6%)	6 (34%)	11 (60%)
5. Play allows participants to better understand themselves and their world.	Pre	1 (6%)	0	6 (33%)	3 (17%)	8 (44%)
	Post	0	0	4 (22%)	3 (17%)	11 (60%)
6. Play relaxes and focuses the mind for both children and adults.	Pre	0	2 (11%)	3 (17%)	6 (33%)	7 (39%)
	Post	0	1 (6%)	0	2 (11%)	15 (83%)
7. Adults need play to understand its value and role in the learning process.	Pre	0	0	6 (33%)	2 (11%)	10 (56%)
	Post	0	0	2 (11%)	4 (22%)	12 (67%)
8. Participating in hands-on play gives adults insight on how children learn.	Pre	0	0	5 (28%)	3 (17%)	10 (55%)
	Post	0	0	2 (11%)	2 (11%)	14 (78%)
9. Using open-ended materials taps into the basic human need to express thoughts and feeling through play.	Pre	0	0	6 (33%)	4 (22%)	8 (45%)
	Post	0	1 (6%)	3 (17%)	1 (6%)	13 (71%)
10. Teachers learn from engaging in play, just as young children do.	Pre	0	0	6 (33%)	2 (11%)	10 (56%)
	Post	0	0	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	16 (88%)

11. Play reduces stress in both children and adults.	Pre	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	3 (16%)	3 (16%)	9 (50%)
	Post	0	0	0	3 (17%)	15 (83%)
12. Play belongs at the core of the early childhood classroom.	Pre	2 (12%)	1 (6%)	2 (11%)	3 (16%)	10 (55%)
	Post	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	0	2 (11%)	14 (77%)

Note: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree

Discussion

Even though the sample size was small ($n=18$) and all the teachers worked in the same preschool building, the results were encouraging. The workshop involved two different types of play. The first was solo play, in which the participants had to “work” on their own, and the second was partner play, in which the participants had to work with a peer or small group. The participants found value in both types of play. One participant stated, “This was so fun! [sic] I liked creating on my own, but I also liked working with a peer.” Another participant stated, “Play time is FUN!! This activity brought me closer to my peers, and I got to learn more about them while playing.” Another participant stated, “I now realize that young children learn both ways, through quiet or solo play and through group play.”

Before the workshop, only 10 teachers believed that they could learn in the same manner as young children by engaging in play (Statement 10). However, after the workshop, 16 preschool teachers believed that play could also be beneficial for adults for a number of reasons. This concept is one of the foundational assumptions that supported growth found within several other statements, as many of the participants experienced not only relaxation through reduction of stress and discovery of inner peace (Statements 3 and 11) but also creativity and focus (Statement 6). One participant commented, “The whole process of independent play was very calming. I drew a picture; it was very nice to think about drawing and not worry about anything.” Another participant stated, “Play is very therapeutic. It is very relaxing and lets creative juices thrive.”

Before the workshop, only 10 preschool teachers believed that hands-on play gives adults insights into how children learn (Statement 8). However, after the workshop, 14 preschool teachers believed they had gained some insights into how children feel. One participant stated, “This gave me perspective on how the kids feel when it’s time to end an activity when they are not quite ready.” Another participant stated, “I did not want to stop, as my creation was not done yet.”

Before the workshop, 10 preschool teachers believed that play belonged at the core of early childhood classrooms (Statement 12). However, after the workshop, 14 believed play was important and should be part of early childhood curriculum. One participant stated, “It would be so great to allow kids to participate in open-ended play together!” Another participant stated, “This was awesome! I wish parents could do this workshop to understand that play is important in their child’s healthy development.” Another participant stated, “I am going to have to put more free time into the schedule so students can explore and create and work/play together.”

Conclusion

The results of the workshop were encouraging because, in a short 3½ hours, most of these preschool teachers changed their minds and attitudes about the importance of play in

the curriculum. The age of accountability and high-stakes testing has had a harmful impact on the inclusion of play (Ramsey, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009), and perhaps lack of play has negatively affected both students' healthy development and their academic achievement.

In this busy, crazy world, adults need to slow down and play. Educators and other adults need to model for children that play is an important part of one's life (Elkind, 2008), as it keeps an individual balanced and healthy. When adults value play, then the magic of play will be exposed, thereby upgrading the value of play so that it can be reinstated into the school curriculum (Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013). As a result, perhaps children will be more emotionally mature and motivated to tackle the hard work of learning. Perhaps when children learn how to master the intricacies of play, their lives will be more enriched and they will have learned to behave more responsibly. They will have learned to value sincerely the differences found within people so they can meet the challenges and frustrations of life with optimism and creativity.

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