

The Role of Play in Full-Day Kindergarten

In a period of expanded standardized testing of skills in reading and mathematics and the extension of the kindergarten day, some school administrators and kindergarten teachers have felt a pressure to focus full-day kindergarten programs on teaching mainly isolated skills in reading and mathematics. This focus on a narrowly defined *academic orientation* has left little time for an *intellectual orientation* that includes conceptual experiences in science and social studies.

Play and sociodramatic play in particular are powerful conceptual experiences that enhance learning in kindergarten. In fact, child's play has a significant influence on the development of an intellectual orientation that includes conceptual experiences, critical thinking, literacy, and social competency. Play, therefore, is an essential component of an intellectually oriented full-day kindergarten program.

Due to the dynamic character of playing and because it is observable, teachers are able to assess what children know and can do by integrating play into the kindergarten classroom. In fact, noted educator John Dewey makes the point that there is a continuum of chaos-play-work-drudgery (1933, pp. 284–297), and that the balance between play and work serves learning.

A Definition of Play

Play is a self-chosen activity that allows children to feel powerful. When children independently choose an activity, they view the activity as “play” and view the same activity as “work” in response to an adult request (King, 1992).

- *Play is voluntary.* Children play for the sake of playing.
- *Play is meaningful.* Even when using their imaginations, children's play *has connections* to their experiences.
- *Play is symbolic.* It *represents* their experiences and imaginations.
- *Play is rule-governed.* As children *negotiate* their play roles, they talk about their roles before playing and *become* their roles while playing.
- *Play is pleasurable.* Even when they engage in serious play themes, such as funerals and illness, children derive a sense of satisfaction that transcends the moment.
- *Play is episodic.* Children share similar unwritten “scripts” that they have developed together. Kindergarten children emphasize the activity rather than the “outcomes” (Dewey, 1933).
- *Play is one condition for learning* in kindergarten that integrates emotional, social, and cognitive learning. Children bring their prior experiences to their play and, through interactions with others, can modify, extend, and expand their learning.

Kindergarten children's learning is meaningful when play is *integrated* with other conditions for learning such as:

Inductive experiences—When kindergarten children have opportunities to compare things and ideas during play, their learning becomes more dynamic. If children have only one thing or idea available, then they need to rely on memory and rote learning instead of constructing new meanings.

Cognitive dissonance—When children experience outcomes different from logical predictions, their curiosity is stimulated, and it encourages additional exploration during play.

Social interaction—When children make the transition from a person-centered view to a broader view that acknowledges the feelings and perceptions of others through play, their ability to understand new meanings is increased. (Piaget et al., 1965).

Physical experiences—When children make direct comparisons between familiar and new objects or physical qualities through play, it provides a way for them to build additional meaning.

Revisiting—When children are able to revisit objects or “replay” situations, these multiple opportunities or intervening experiences allow them to extend their understanding of an earlier experience and develop new *relationships*. [Piaget & Inhelder (1973) and The Reggio Emilia schools (Edwards Gandini, & Forman, 1998).]

Competence—When children worry about their competence, or coping with a sense of inadequacy, they find it difficult to focus on new meanings—an essential aspect of meaningful learning. However, when they engage in play, children control the balance between the degree of challenge and risk, which frees them to build meanings without fear of inadequacy. [Bruner (1966) on coping and defending and Goleman (1995).]

The Significance of Sociodramatic Play in the Full-Day Kindergarten

Sociodramatic play is the most advanced form of social and symbolic play, where children carry out imitation, drama, and fantasy play together. There is a kindergarten tradition of sociodramatic play, typically present in two classroom centers that include the unit floor blocks and a play house.

Literacy and Sociodramatic Play

When children engage in sociodramatic play they are engaged in collaborative, oral play-writing, editing, and acting. This activity is part of the process of learning to appreciate a sense of story, and develops their oral voices and their writer’s voices in order to communicate effectively with an audience.

After the first month of the school year, thoughtful teachers change the props in the playhouse to encourage expanded literacy skills. For example, they provide props that represent medical offices, food markets, toy stores, clothing stores, and farms. They also include literacy materials

such as signs, labels, writing materials, and books. Researchers have found that children respond to these varied provisions by engaging in expanded literacy activities (Bagley & Klass, 1997; Christie, 1991; Dodge & Frost, 1986; Levy, Schaefer, & Phelps, 1986; Morrow, 1997; Neuman & Roskos, 1991; Schrader, 1989, 1990; Vukelich, 1991) and expanded use of vocabulary (Cazden, 1971). Kindergarten children will have reasons to read and write with a varied vocabulary when teachers change the materials in the housekeeping center or the block center to create different environments such as a hospital, supermarket, restaurant, airport, or beauty salon.

Mathematical and Scientific Concepts Through Sociodramatic Play

As kindergarten children play with unit floor blocks they solve many problems that build their visual-spatial skills. Mathematical as well as scientific concepts in chemistry and physics require the use of visual-spatial skills. Block play and other three-dimensional play activities contribute to the capacity of kindergarten children to visualize, manipulate, and use mathematical and scientific ideas. For example, when children try to estimate and match the heights of the block towers that they have built or try to bridge the distance between the towers with just the right size of block, they deal with relationship issues of size, shape, and space. They explore issues of less than and more than, as well as equivalence. They deal with issues of addition and subtraction. Children, like chemists and physicists can envision their work by using imagery along with mathematics. For example, Albert Einstein said that the pictures in his head, not advanced mathematical formula, helped him to develop the theory of relativity (Sullivan, 1972).

Girls are underrepresented in the fields of science and mathematics. Therefore, teachers have found that they need to provide equitable access to the unit blocks for girls as well as boys. When teachers place themselves in the block center and invite girls to play, more girls will participate (Serbin, 1978). Also, when they increase the amount of available blocks, girls as well as boys use the blocks, although often in same-gendered dyads (Rogers, 1985). Providing sufficient space for imaginative and constructive play greatly improves opportunities for equitable access, while insufficient space or materials can contribute to competition and strife.

Research on the Influences of Play on Development

Researchers have found that young children's play positively influences the development of social competence, language, and cognition, though findings concerning the impact of play on creativity are mixed as follows: [Footnote 1: See Fromberg, 2002 for an extended review of the research.]

Social Competence. The process of negotiation with others helps children to *decenter* from themselves—to understand that others have opinions, ideas, and motives—a process that builds social competence and a “theory of mind.” The children's insights into others' possible perceptions and concerns influence their multicultural education.

Language Development. The process of speaking with others about different topics during sociodramatic play helps to improve language complexity, variety, and quantity. In addition,

story comprehension improves when children role played the story's events (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982).

Cognitive Development. The use of alternative approaches to ideas through negotiation with and observation of other children and adults is a process called *decontextualization*. Children build their capacity to substitute objects and then symbols for their prototypes. It is particularly helpful for kindergarten teachers to understand that children who use unstructured toys first, engage in more extended collaborative script-building than those who use high-specificity props (McGhee, Etheridge, & Berg, 1984; McLoyd, 1983; Wanska, Pohlman, & Bedrosian, 1989). The IQ scores of young children increased when they had experiences with an enriched play repertoire (Levenstein, 1992).

Connection-Making. There are mixed findings concerning the impact of early play on children's general creativity, with most researchers finding that young children become keener connection makers and problem solvers within the play context, especially when they used unstructured props (Dansky, 1986; Feitelson & Ross, 1973; Freyberg, 1973). Young children in pairs and trios stimulated each other's imagination (Bruner, 1980) and strengthened their sense of competence when they solved problems together (Gitlin-Weiner, 1998).

The Full-Day Kindergarten Teacher's Role in Sociodramatic Play

Some of the ways in which teachers can support play—while keeping alive rich experiences for literacy, mathematical, and scientific learning—include the following:

Schedule Long Blocks of Center-Based Time for Sociodramatic Play.

With the longer kindergarten day, teachers report that there is more time for in-depth conversations and for two extended blocks of time (from 45–75 minutes) during which children can engage in sociodramatic play, role playing, educational games, and the arts in general. The arts, as a personal form of expression for young children, feel like play. The visual and oral arts are early forms of representation that also help children understand the symbolic representation of written words and numeric systems. During this time, children can engage in creative writing, self-select fine quality trade books, and pursue science, social science, and art projects.

Plan and Use Space.

Along with time, teachers provide space for play. In order to provide egalitarian access to the valuable sociodramatic centers, it is helpful to place floor blocks next to the housekeeping area. Teachers who change the props also find that opportunities expand for girls as well as boys to integrate their play with one another.

Pace: Respect the Need for Children to Choose Repetition.

Children enjoy repetition when the repetition helps them to make things predictable and when the repetition helps them to move closer to solving problems and finding answers to the questions that have meaning to them. [Footnote 2: The popular educational television program, *Blues Clues*, effectively uses the principles of repetition and controlled variables to create active involvement in learning (Gladwell, 2002).] The role of the teacher is to recognize the

opportunities and provide the time for children to self-select repetition. For example, a model kindergarten teacher recognized that children needed at least 30 minutes each day to satisfy their need for play with three-dimensional blocks before they were ready to engage in two-dimensional activities (Paley, 1984).

At the same time, the sensitive kindergarten teacher observes when repetition becomes ritualized, a signal that the teacher needs to intervene with a new variable or direction for the activity. In effect, the teacher needs to help the occasional child balance his or her dependence upon a single activity to the exclusion of fresh social and educational opportunities, for example, by bringing children together to focus on a new variable; or furloughing a particular activity from the classroom for a few days of a week.

In contrast, the procedure in a workbook—typical in academically oriented classrooms—is to answer exercise questions for which there is only one correct response and then to move on to another exercise. Thus, the workbook does not teach, but merely tests isolated information.

Scaffold.

Scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1987) lies in the “next step” (Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development) that teachers can take to support and challenge children. One example, mentioned above, is the successful scaffolding of girls by sensitive teachers in order to support their play in the block center. Successful scaffolds take place when teachers seamlessly enter the play framework, for example, “Where could we use this block? Which block is large enough to reach across both of these blocks?” and then withdraw as soon as possible in order to observe.

The teacher who enters seamlessly into and out of kindergarten children’s oral playwriting demonstrates respect and validates the children’s power to engage in this collaborative narrative. Sensitive teachers might take a role within an ongoing play script, model an extension of ongoing interaction, “wonder if” something might happen next, or suggest that another child might assist the players by bringing in a new prop.

Assess.

The thematic content of kindergarten children’s play reveals their developing category systems and their understanding of events. If assessment focuses on children’s development of meaning then it would make sense to value a variety of different assessment formats and products. For example, when children play outdoors, teachers learn more about children’s personal cultures and event knowledge. Children’s playground language may “complement school literacy.” (Gruegeon, 2001, p.114). In this respect, an observant teacher may build on children’s preoccupations as an entry into school literacy. When teachers see how events shift during play and children make new connections, they can envision how children learn new meanings. Then, teachers have more data to help select additional play and work opportunities for kindergarten children that can extend their learning.

It is worth mentioning that researchers Jerome Singer and Dorothy Singer (1979) have “found that high-imagination children reported greater contact with parents who modeled or provided specific opportunities for fantasy play. High-imagination children manifested a capacity to wait quietly for a longer period of time, reporting fantasy play as they did so. They also scored high in

imaginative storytelling, made more analogical kinds of statements, and were more persevering than low-fantasy children.” (Cited in Fromberg, 1999, p. 40). A related study supports these findings (Trostle, 1988). Parents, as well as teachers, can use such information to support their children’s development.

Concluding Statement

Thus, beyond paper-and-pencil workbooks and tests, there are many forms in which children can represent what they know and can do. Children’s play, particularly sociodramatic play, is a dynamic form of representation that highlights children’s learning. To provide opportunities for kindergarten children to engage in play contributes to both intellectual and ethical teaching.

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