Bringing Play Back to the Classroom: How Teachers Implement Board and Card Games Based on Academic Learning Standards

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Abstract: Research on implementing board games in elementary classrooms was conducted. The purpose of the study was to investigate how teachers' utilized play based methods in teaching academic learning standards. Teachers had funds to purchase, adapt and/or develop games to teach learning standards. Guidelines were developed to help guide their selections, including that games should be used at least once a week. Teachers identified the academic standard being addressed and kept weekly journals addressing a) teacher's reactions to the games, b) students' responses to the games; c) teacher's perception of how the game either did or did not help students' meet the academic standard(s). Journals were collected at the end of the year. That information and an exit interview with each teacher provided data for the researcher to analyze using content analysis and what Lincoln and Guba (1985) have termed "ethnographic analytic strategies" that are appropriate with qualitative data. Findings include: 1) teachers being able to discuss play practices with other teachers (the monthly meetings) aided them in thinking about different ways to implement using play in their classrooms; 2) students were more enthusiastic about learning and were learning the material in a 'deeper' manner; 3) students learned more social skills in working with other students. Teachers mentioned that while the social skills learned made sense, they did not anticipate the difference it seemed to make in their classroom management and in the classroom climate. Overall, all teachers planned to continue to use games to teach academic standards in the future.

Keywords: play, academic standards, developmentally appropriate practice, teaching strategies

1. Introduction

Children's learning through play has been well documented. Research studies have determined that play fosters many cognitive processes, including promoting theory of mind (Flavell, 1988; Harris, 1991; Leslie, 1987; Schwebel, Rosen & Singer, 1999), developing symbolic representation of object (Bergen, 2002; Gowen, 1995; Singer & Singer, 2004), understanding humor development of language and literacy (Bergen, 2002; Singer & Singer, 1981; Lewis, 1973), promoting mathematical literacy and other academic skill development (Cristie & Roskos, 1999; Wolfgang, Stannard & Jones, 2001); providing socio-cultural learning opportunities for all children including those from diverse, ethnic, racial and national groups (Roopnarine, et al., 1998; Roopnarine & Krishnakumar, 2009; Singer et al, 2009); increasing language and literacy development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006); promoting memory recall (Charness, 1979; Egan & Scwarz, 1979; Allard & Starkes, 1980); and increasing academic achievement (Marzano, 2010).

Brain research has determined that play is necessary for brain development (Bergen, 2003; Barnett, 1998). In fact, we know that play keeps the frontal lobe of the brain challenged with critical thinking and problem solving (Sylwester, 1995). Additionally, it has been reported that through play, children develop a more positive attitude toward the learning process (Bergen, 2006).

Many other "non-academic" benefits of play have been determined through research. Through play, children have an increase in social skills, including cooperation, learning to take turns, sharing, listening, negotiating with others, learning to manage emotions, etc. (Landreth, 2002; Elias & Berk, 2002). They learn to follow rules, either through games that have set rules, or rules that are self-imposed by the play group. Creativity is another feature that is fostered through play. Playing allows children to practice skills in a "safe" environment and also gives them a chance to understand others' perspectives. It has also been reported that play helps children develop strategies to handle stressful life events (Saltz & Brodie, 1982: Feitelson, 1972; Simalansky, 1968).

One category of play that can be easily adapted into a classroom /school situation is the use of board and/or card games. According to Elkind (2008):

> *Once children reach school age, games with rules become a good option. These offer unique social and developmental experiences that often cannot be acquired any other way. Children playing Monopoly learn to develop strategies and take risks while, in card*

games, they acquire the ability to observe others and evaluate their intent. Even with basic games, children learn mutual respect as they make their own rules. This kind of social learning cannot be found much in the play of computer games. (p. 1).

Research on the use of board games, as learning/teaching strategies, have supported the use of play in the classroom. Studies have found that students learn to understand the perspective of other players (DeVries, 2006), develop and use a range of strategies, such as planning ahead, predicting the outcome of alternative moves, and learning from experience (Selman & Shultz, 1990; Kamii & DeVries, 1980); gain a more thorough understanding of academic content (Siegler & Ramani, 2009). Additionally, when children play with older role models they can how learn to win and lose gracefully (Gobet et al 2004).

The question does not appear to be whether play is important. From the many research studies conducted over the years, it has been determined that play is indeed an important element of learning. Therefore, the question appears to be why is play's importance to learning so often overlooked and/or devalued.

Our schools are contributing to the societal manifestation of not recognizing the importance or value of play in the lives of children. By the time children are in school, play in the classroom seems to be more abnormal than normal. The education world has often implemented what is seen as "adult teaching" strategies in the education of children. In many, if not most classrooms, children sit at their desks doing worksheets, taking notes or reading. Interaction between children in the classroom is minimal and the high rate of interaction appears to be the teacher giving instructions or imparting knowledge. We have many children who have been diagnosed depressed, having attention deficit disorders, and behavioral problems. We have schools that have reduced or cancelled recess in favor of more "class time". We have curriculums that are to be taught from a read script and we have academic standards that dictate how quickly material must be presented in a classroom. It appears that our increasing emphasis on academic standards have all but eliminated creative and playful techniques, in favor of rote learning methods that are used to prepare children for the all too frequent assessments. According to Elkind (2007), "Children's play . . . is being silenced in the high-tech, commercialized world we have created" (p. ix).

Very little research on play in the elementary classroom has been conducted. One of the reasons for this appears to be that research can't be conducted if the play is not present. Teachers often feel pressured to focus on academic achievement and to prepare children for the testing to see if those academic achievement standards have been met and learned. Many teachers don't feel that they have the autonomy that was once the cornerstone of teaching. Instructional decisions are often made for them, and without their input. Finally, parents, in their effort to help their children succeed academically, often confuse memorization with achievement (Hirsch-Pasek, et al, 2003; Samuelsson et al, 2006; Singer et al, 2006).

2. Research method

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate teachers' use of play-based methods in teaching academic standards to students in elementary grades (Grades 1, 2, 3 and 5). For the purpose of this study, play-based methods including non-electronic games, such as board games and/or card games. Because this study utilizes a case-study format, the findings are not generalizable beyond the teachers who have agreed to participate in this research. However, the intent of this study is to inform future research that will target the use of using play-based techniques in enhancing children's cognitive knowledge in school/classroom settings.

2.1 Description of project and methods employed

Four elementary teachers (one from grade 1, 2, 3, and 5) who have expressed interest in implementing play-based strategies were contacted by the researcher.

Once teachers were identified, they (in conjunction with the researcher) established the academic standards on which they would like to focus using the play-based strategies. The identified standards were in all content areas in all four grades.

Through research funds, teachers were able to purchase, adapt and/or develop games to teach the selected standards. The following guidelines guided their selections:

- Games must be able to be played in 20 minutes.
- Games should be used at least once a week to help develop skills necessary to meet the selected academic standard(s).
- Once taught the games, students should be able to either play independently or cooperatively in a small group where the teacher becomes more of a moderator rather than a participant.

For data collection, teachers agreed to:

- Identify the content area and academic standard(s) being addressed
- Describe/Identify the game with any adaptations and explain on paper how the game will help the students meet selected standard(s).
- Keep weekly journals addressing a) teacher's reactions to the games, b) students' responses to the games; c) teacher's perception of how the game either did or did not help students' meet the academic standard(s); d) how the teacher will need to adjust the game, rules, etc. so students are either meeting the standards in a better way, OR to increase the level of difficulty so students gain proficiency in meeting the standard, and e) any other relevant reflections regarding the implementation of the play-based strategy.

After an initial meeting with the participants, the researcher emailed them weekly for a brief update and to give encouragement and support. Group monthly meetings were also held to discuss any issues and/or questions and to make any necessary accommodations.

During the second semester, the teachers were able to request additional funding for additional games and/or materials to support their play-based strategies in their classrooms. Journals were collected at the end of the year. Each teacher also participated in an exit interview with the researcher.

Journal entries, transcripts from the monthly meetings and the exit interview provided data for the researcher to analyze using content analysis and what Lincoln and Guba (1985) have termed "ethnographic analytic strategies" that are appropriate with qualitative data.

Content analysis was employed in "making sense" of the collected data. While categories for data coding can be decided prior to the data analysis, this research employed the emergent design, where categories were determined or emerged from the analyzed data. Themes were discovered in the teachers' writings that will fall into two broad categories "what is said" (or subject matter) and "how it is said" (or device). The main vehicle for the content analysis was the journals kept by the teachers, however, transcripts from the monthly meeting where teachers met were also utilized.

Once coding decisions have been determined, systems of enumeration (how words or phrases will be counted) were established. These formed the "rules" that guided the analysis. These coding decisions were made by the researcher and a colleague who independently reviewed the material and came up with a set of categories. Second, the reviewers compared notes and reconciled differences that showed up on their individual category lists. Then the reviewers independently applied the coding to the written journals and meeting transcripts. Finally, the reliability of the coding was checked with a 95% agreement level. If the level of reliability was not acceptable in any category, then the previous steps were repeated. Once reliability had been established, the coding was applied on a large scale basis with periodic quality control checks (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3. Findings

Five major themes or categories emerged from the data. These included:

- Logistics of Play Based Teaching (such as how to introduce and/or teach the games, how to group students, how many students to place in a group, etc.)
- Students' Reactions (how the students responded to the games, etc.)
- Teachers' Reactions (how the teachers felt the lesson transpired, etc.)
- Pedagogical Decisions (how the game should be modified to better meet the academic standards, etc.)
- Impact to the Classroom Environment (teachers' perceptions of the impact of games to the classroom as a whole)

3.1 Logistics of play based teaching

Teachers introduced the games in various ways. The teacher, who worked with the youngest students, had a teacher's aide take small groups of students to another part of the classroom to teach the game to them. In this way, students were able to learn the game prior to the entire class participating in "board game day". Another teacher taught the game to the class as a whole, by modeling it. The third teacher divided the students up into small gaming groups, gave them the directions and the game and told them to "figure it out". The last teacher worked with a small group of students during lunch break, teaching them the game. These students, in turn, then taught small groups of their classmates the game. All teachers reported that students were receptive to learning the game even if they were confused at times. One teacher wrote: "I observed the students looking, listening, touching and organizing the game. Some students started playing the game. As I walked around and talked to the students, I could tell they didn't fully understand the directions and tried playing anyways."

3.2 Students' reactions

All four teachers wrote about the excitement of the students when they were playing the board games. Things noted were "The children were absorbed in the game", "Kids were excited and involved", "Students got started playing right away", and Student's love the game." In many of the classrooms, students would ask to play the games and when they had indoor recess (due to weather); they would voluntarily break into small groups and play the games. One teacher wrote: "Everyone seemed excited and there was much communication, laughter, encouragement and some discussion on association words. Students wee cooperative on taking turns, having jobs and being fair. I wish this would happen during all my lessons with them." Another noted that students are "playing with enthusiasm and quickness," while another wrote, "I enjoy seeing them (students) be successful and proud of themselves for applying their new knowledge."

There were a three instances noted where a child did not want to participate in the games. Another teacher stated that when some games were too challenging for the students and they became frustrated until changes were made to the game. However, these instances were rarely reported and adjustments were made to better meet the needs of the students.

3.3 Teachers' reactions

Teachers were enthusiastic about the games they selected. They wrote about their concerns of finding games to meet academic standards, but later described the plethora of games from which to choose. One teacher was dismayed because so many of her student's had not played any board games and did not know board game etiquette. Another noted, "This is teaching at its best."

It is rather strange to note that this category, while certainly separate from the other categories, had the least number of data.

3.4 Pedagogical decisions

Many comments expressed by the teachers, involved making decisions about how to "better" the game for the students. In all journals, each teacher notes multiple times how they are going to change or adjust a game for either the whole class or for a select group of students. They gave concrete examples of what these steps would be and, when implemented, wrote about how the changes enhanced the learning and enjoyment of the children. As one teacher wrote, "After adjusting the group size, the game went more smoothly. This way each child had more chance to play. . . . This game allows the "unexpected" students to shine."

At different times throughout the year, teachers either used different games with different groups of students or differentiated games for students based on their readiness level. This allowed them to better meet the needs of their students. One teacher expressed the ease at being able to "change up the game" and help students become successful. Another wrote, "I learned I can slow games down or speed them up, and the kids have fun."

Another topic that was discussed in both the journals and at the monthly meetings was the ease of finding games to meet academic standards. One teacher said, "There are a lot of avenues to find games and to keep kids interested. The standards are really quite easy for meeting with board

games." Teachers discussed how they would share their games with each other and still be able to keep them "fresh" for their students. They felt that many of the games could cross grade level academic standards and that by using the games in multiple grade levels, they would benefit from not having to teach each game separately at each level.

3.5 Impact to the classroom environment

Two major thoughts emerged in this category. Teachers were excited to use play in the classroom which carried over to the classroom. Also, student conduct used during board games began to appear in other classroom experiences.

Teachers were amazed that they enjoyed their monthly meetings discussing the games. At the beginning of the year, they stated that they needed to hurry through the meetings so they could finish up their day. After the first meeting, they began to linger and to share stories and strategies. One teacher wrote, "It was so nice to have others to talk to about this. I could bring their energy and ideas into my classroom. I think it (their ideas) made a difference to me and my kids." Another stated, "What I thought was going to be a waste of my time, became much more. I can't remember discussing and sharing with teachers before. Mostly, when we have meetings, we get "talked to". At these meetings, we were the talkers."

The other area, which surprised the teachers, was the carryover of student behavior from the games to other areas in the classroom. In every journal, in every month, teachers wrote about the cooperation of the students as they played the games. As the school year continued, they also noted that students were more cooperative during the rest of the school day. One teacher noted, "Hard to believe these are the same kids. They want to help each other more and seem to be more understanding. Is that possible?" In a monthly meeting, one teacher stated that her "classroom management has gotten much easier." Another wrote, "I will be using games at the beginning of the school year to build classroom community. This is a great and easy way for kids to figure it out themselves."

4. Conclusions

The findings from this study appear to support the following conclusions:

- Play can be easily introduced into the classroom by the use of board games. These games can be adapted to meet academic standards. Having students actively involved in these games ensures they have better success at acquiring the desired learning outcomes. Because students reported to the teachers that they "love" the game or by actions indicating enjoyment, learning has been achieved through play.

- Teachers have the ability to change or adapt the games to better meet the needs of their students. Games must be chosen with the knowledge of the developmental level of the student and the academic standard in mind. After acquiring practice in using games in the classroom, teachers were able to easily make changes that they felt resulted in a better learning situation. Teachers were also able to locate many games that would meet their desired learning outcomes. Teachers reported that the games helped students achieve the academic standard in a more fun and supportive manner.

- Teacher groups that are focused on play based pedagogy using games resulted in a positive attitude from the educators. They reported learning from each other and were able to discuss matters with others who were employing the same techniques. This symbiotic relationship seemed to reinforce teacher's convictions about the importance of play and the multiple ways that they can still use it in the classroom despite the imposed academic standards for which they are held accountable. After teacher discussions, they were able to think and implement classroom play in multiple and different ways.

- The use of board games in the classroom helped students develop social skills that transferred to other areas. Teachers reported students appeared to be more helpful, cooperative and thoughtful of other students after playing board games. These actions appeared after routine weekly game lessons. Teachers mentioned that while the growth of social skills seemed to be a logical outcome, it was not one they neither anticipated nor expected. Classroom management and the classroom environment seem to improve after students engaged in board game play.

All teachers planned to continue to use games to teach academic standards in the future.

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