LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

An Educational Project

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science

In

Education

By

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2010
LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Approved by  Alison Bunte
Date:  September 2, 2010
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“Kindergarten is a time for children to expand their love of learning, their general knowledge, their ability to get along with others, and their interest in reaching out to the world.” (National association for the education of young children - promoting excellence in early childhood education. 2008) Children can expand their love of learning and their general knowledge through play. Learning to get along with others is also a social skill that is developed through play in Kindergarten. A child’s interest in reaching out to the world is an ongoing process but can first be developed through play and interaction with other children and the environment that the child is in. Children can learn through play by exploring the things around them. Kindergarten is an important transition for children. It is very important that children still get to be the children that they are.

Kindergarten classrooms encourage the children to have self-esteem, encourage independence, and encourage children to develop their own behavior. The teachers in the kindergarten classroom can provide the children what they need to grow physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Kindergarten classrooms will vary and the curriculum will vary due to the interests and backgrounds of the children. However, all developmentally appropriate kindergarten classrooms will have one thing in common, the development of the child. One thing that children need to develop is to have play in kindergarten.
Play is very critical for children. Play has an impact on a child’s social, emotional, physical, cognitive development, and language development as well. There are so many ways that a child can learn through play. It is common today for children to not have enough play opportunities at home. This is because of the toys that they interact with, such as video games, computers, and television. These toys do not develop imagination like the play that takes place in a kindergarten classroom. A kindergarten classroom also offers the children the opportunity to play with others to develop social skills with children of the same age. Not all children have siblings at home to interact with so the kindergarten classroom provides the children with this opportunity to interact with other children and develop acceptable social skills.

Statement of the Problem

Play in kindergarten and early childhood is often seen as just “play”. Many people are unaware of how play in the classroom is beneficial to students and how important it is for the child’s development. People often think that school should be academics and not play. Has kindergarten become too academic and why do children need play in school? What is the importance of play in kindergarten; how children learn through play, and how play is structured in the classroom?
Purpose of the Research

The primary goal of this research is to show why play is important in the kindergarten and early childhood classrooms and how the children develop through play. Researching the importance of play in the classroom will help me as a teacher to structure the play in my classroom making it developmentally appropriate for children to develop socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively, as well as develop language skills appropriate for their age.

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted through Karrmann libraries (University of Wisconsin-Platteville) over a period of forty-three (43) days. Primary searches will be conducted via Internet through EBSCO Host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and Professional Development Collection and Wilson Databases. Key search topics will include “play and Kindergarten,” and “play and Early Childhood.”

Method of Approach

The importance of play in Kindergarten will be discussed. A review of literature on the importance of play in children and how play affects the
development of children. Furthermore, literature related to overly academic kindergarten will also be reviewed.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Kindergarten vs. Academics

“Play and young children seem to belong together like peanut butter and jelly.’” (Leong & Bodrova, 2003) I find this statement to be true. I believe that children need to have play everyday. It seems that in today’s society Kindergarten is becoming more and more academic. Kindergarten teachers are feeling the pressure to demand more academics in their classroom and to take away the play.

As the academic content taught in school becomes more demanding, young children need to spend more, not less, time in play – to experiment with symbols, ideas, and relationships not tied to any particular content. Children who miss out on play in their early years may have gaps in their social, cognitive, and linguistic development. (Leong & Bodrova, 2003)

According to Jen Scott Curwood’s article What Happened to Kindergarten, academics heavy kindergarten may actually hurt kids down the road. She states four reasons why.

1. Kids learn to socialize through play. It may look like a simple game of hide-and-seek, but it’s how kids learn about rules, role-playing, and working with one another.
2. **Play teaches numbers, letters, and reasoning.** When kids sort sticks and stones, read stories, and ask questions about the world, they’re preparing for a lifetime of learning.

3. **Play breeds imagination and innovation.** You only have to watch a small group of children playing with blocks for a few minutes to know how such activities encourage creativity. Deny kids that experience, and they lose out.

4. **Play helps kids to cope.** The average game of tag is full of drama – and, through disagreements and the occasional bruise, kids learn to deal with bigger problems. (Curwood, 2007)

Kindergarten is becoming more and more academic because of the importance of early learning and the capabilities of young children today. With so much pressure on the teachers to teach the essential skills for reading and math, teachers feel that time for play is limited.

When children play together they learn to play a variety of different roles. They learn how to think quickly or “on demand” and how to use their emotions and actions when playing with other children. When children play with other children it develops their social skills with others. “Research demonstrates that make-believe play develops symbolic thinking, self-regulation, and creativity. When children play together, they get a chance to practice their social skills.” (Leong & Bodrova, 2003)

Children learn how to be social, develop cognitively and linguistically by playing everyday. Play allows children to use their imagination and dramatic
thinking as well. For example, children playing in the block area of a classroom learn to be social and develop cognitively and linguistically. Children can create all kinds of things using blocks. Children use their imagination when playing in the block area. Teachers can help to stretch their imagination by encouraging the children to communicate about their play and to tell about what is happening in the block area. By encouraging the children to communicate the language skills of the children will sharpen. When playing children can use nonrealistic props in their play. Using nonrealistic props in their play stretches their imagination and also develops their language. When children play with other children or groups of children it helps to develop their language skills.

Children use language extensively. They jointly plan the scenario, negotiate the roles and actions, agree on using imaginary props, and remind each other about the rules. They try out new words, expressions, and intonations to fit their characters. They develop vocabulary, mastery of grammar, and use of language. (Leong & Bodrova, 2003)

Kindergarten is not just a time for reading, writing, math, and science. Kindergarteners also need gross motor and fine motor activities built into their day. Some children have never had the experience of holding a pencil or cutting with a scissors before coming to school. Children need a lot of practice with these tasks. “When kindergarten children enter school, not all of them are at the same academic level. The developmental gap between children in any classroom can be two and a half years.” (D'Ordine, 2002) Paper and pencil tasks are too overwhelming for children of this age.
According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, there are ten signs of a good kindergarten classroom.

1. Children are playing and working with materials or other children. They are not aimlessly wandering or forced to sit quietly for long periods of time.

2. Children have access to various activities throughout the day, such as block building, pretend play, picture books, paints and other art materials, and table toys such as legos, pegboards, and puzzles. Children are not all doing the same things at the same time.

3. Teachers work with individual children, small groups, and the whole group at different times during the day. They do not spend time only with the entire group.

4. The classroom is decorated with children’s original artwork, their own writing with invented spelling, and dictated stories.

5. Children learn numbers and the alphabet in the context of their everyday experiences. Exploring the natural world of plants and animals, cooking, taking attendance, and serving snack are all meaningful activities to children.

6. Children work on projects and have long periods of time (at least one hour) to play and explore. Filling out worksheets should not be their primary activity.

7. Children have an opportunity to play outside every day that weather permits. This play is never sacrificed for more instructional time.
Teachers read books to children throughout the day, not just at group story time.

9. Curriculum is adapted for those who are ahead as well as those who need additional help. Because children differ in experiences and background, they do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way.

10. Children and their parents look forward to school. Parents feel safe sending their children to kindergarten. Children are happy; they are not crying or regularly sick. (*National association for the education of young children - promoting excellence in early childhood education.* 2008)

Play and learning go together in the classroom. The teachers are responsible for preparing and planning lesson plans where children can learn from a variety of activities while having fun at the same time. Early childhood and kindergarten is the time when children learn how to learn. The best way for this learning to happen is through play.

**The importance of play**

Many children today do not have enough play opportunities at home. This is largely because of television, video games, and computer games. “On average, our children watch 28 hours of television each week – all stealing time from social interactions, abstract thinking, creativity, and play.” (Perry, 2001) When children watch television, play video games, or computer games they are interacting with toys that do not build their imagination to its fullest. “An hour of
“educational” television does not have the same power as an hour of play.” (Perry, 2001)

Play is the primary way that children explore the world, to learn social skills, and to grow emotionally. “Play is the young child’s dominant mode of learning. When we take away time from that playful learning, we deprive the child of self-created learning experiences.” (Elkind, 2007, p.82) Play is the oldest and best learning tool for children of all ages. Play teaches children to make emotional, intellectual, and social connections.

There is a growing body of research that shows a link between play and the development of cognitive and social skills that are prerequisites for learning more complex concepts as children get older. For example, play is linked to growth in memory, self-regulation, oral language, and recognizing symbols. It has been linked to higher levels of school adjustment and increased social development. Play has also been linked to increased literacy skills and other areas of academic learning (a view held by Piagetian and Vygotskian theories of child development). (Almy, 2000)

Play is the work of children. When children play they experiment with different possibilities and become more flexible in thinking and problem solving and can adapt to different situations accordingly.

Most primary school teachers would probably agree that they don’t expect kindergarteners to enter first grade with a complete mastery of spelling or addition. After all, it is in the early elementary grades when children learn
these academic competencies. However, teachers of entering school-agers
do hope that children who come into their classroom can concentrate, pay
attention, and be considerate of others. These areas are developed not by
using flashcards or computer programs, but through interacting with peers
during play. (Almy, 2000)

When children are actively engaged in play they learn through discovery. Young
cchildren learn through self-initiated exploration and discovery.

Play is also an early attempt for children to enter the world of becoming
readers and writers.

Research consistently backs what early elementary teachers know:
Imaginative play is the catalyst for social, physical, emotional, and moral
development in young children. With guidance from an observant teacher,
kindergarteners can use imaginative play to make sense of the world
around them – and lay the critical groundwork for understanding words
and numbers. (Curwood, 2007)

Children develop and practice language skills through play. Singing songs,
learning rhymes, and listening to stories, are all ways that children can practice
word play to develop their language skills.

Play is as essential to the child’s all-around development just as adequate
food and rest is. “Play is our need to adapt the world to ourselves and create new
learning experiences.” (Elkind, 2007, p.3) Play increases the child’s motor
planning, improves hand-eye coordination, fine motor coordination, large motor
coordination, and improves balance. Play enhances the development of a child’s
gross motor skills. When children walk, kick, skip, or jump rope it strengthens their gross motor skills. When a child kicks a ball they are using their gross motor skills as well as practicing their coordination. Kicking a ball requires a child to balance on one foot while kicking with the other foot. Fine motor skills are also developed when a child plays. For example a child playing with blocks is using their fine motor skills to pick up and stack or build with the blocks.

Children also practice hand-eye coordination through play. When throwing or catching a ball children use hand-eye coordination as well as their ability to grasp objects.

The experiences learned through play will also help the children to build confidence in themselves.

Some people think of play as the opposite of work. They associate it with goofing off, being lazy, lack of achievement, or, at best, recreation. “Stop playing and get to work!” Yet, as many of you probably know, it is through play that we do much of our learning. We learn best when we are having fun. Play, more than any other activity, fuels healthy development of children – and, the continued healthy development of adults. (Perry, 2001)

**Developing quality play**

It is vitally important to support and encourage self-directed activities. “All that’s there is sand and holes and water, a few twigs, sometimes shells,
sometimes a little feather or two. Yet children will play all day long.” (Grace, 2005) Children can engage themselves in play with whatever kind of materials they have around them. They will make use of the materials that are available to them at that time. They are using their imagination and creativity to play.

Children are often drawn to other children of the same age to play with. “Children who don’t know one another communicate through self-initiated games. These games are fun because the children are at the same skill level and because it is a relationship of mutual rather than unilateral authority (as with adults).” (Elkind, 2007, p.112) Being drawn to other children of the same age initiates social learning as well as cooperation. When children become school age children they are more likely to play with their friends rather than their parents. This also encourages peer social learning.

Games with rules are the major form of play during the late elementary years, and friends rather than parents become the most desired playmates and companions. It is through creating their own games with rules that children learn important social skills, attitudes, and values. (Elkind, 2007, p.9)

Game play with other children teaches the children to get along and accept one another. Children do not like the feeling of rejection and not being able to play with someone else.

Being told you can’t play is a serious matter. It hurts more than anything else that happens in school, and distractions no longer work very well.

Everyone knows the sounds of rejection: You can’t play; don’t sit by me;
stop following us; I don’t want you for a partner; go away. (Paley, 1992, p.14)

By giving children the opportunity to play they will develop the skills to get along with each other so others won’t feel rejected. They will have the feeling of acceptance. They will build those social skills through playing with others.

What can the teacher do to develop quality play in the classroom? The teacher needs to remember that readiness means that the instructional task is appropriate to the child’s development, and not their chronological age. School must be developmentally appropriate for the children.

We can help kindergarteners make the most of this experience by stretching the experience. We must be the planners of play; sometimes, we must join the play, actively modeling what is to be done and responding to their work constructively. (D'Ordine, 2002)

When planning teachers can make play a valuable part of academic instruction in the classroom. Play develops many skills that are necessary for children. When children build with blocks they are learning spatial relationships and improving their visual memory by remembering what they see. When children put the blocks away onto labeled shelves they are learning to match, classify, and sort the blocks by shape and size. When children work on a puzzle they learn to stick to a task and complete it and to also feel good about completing it. They are also learning to make discriminate the difference between the background and the picture. When children mix two colors of paint to make a new color they are developing an understanding of cause and effect. When
children choose art materials to work with they are learning to make choices, to try new ideas, to plan, and to experiment. When children play house, restaurant, or grocery store, they are improving their language skills and learning how to work together to overcome problems. They are also developing an understanding of social expectations and attitudes of others. This will help them to develop the ability to anticipate how to act in real-life situations. Playing helps to develop many skills that are necessary for children.
Chapter 3

Conclusions and Recommendations

Children expand their love of learning, their general knowledge, and develop skills through play. They develop many skills such as; social skills and language skills, through play. Developing social skills through play allows children to learn to get along with other children, how to work out problems, how to play with other children, and how to communicate with other children. Developing language skills through play allows children to learn to communicate with others, how to problem solve, and how to become readers and writers.

Children learn by exploring the world around them. They develop self-esteem and confidence in themselves, learn independence, and develop gross motor and fine skills. Children develop self-esteem and confidence in themselves through play by experimenting and using their imagination when playing. They develop self-esteem through playing creatively as well. Children learn independence by playing with other groups of children as well as on their own. Children develop their gross motor skills and fine motor skills through play. They do this by the materials they use for play, playing with other children, and using their imagination and creativity when playing.

When children play they develop their own behavior. They develop behavior that is socially acceptable when playing with others and behavior that is socially acceptable when playing independently. Children will develop the skill of being flexible in their thinking and problem solving through play. Play will
help children to develop the ability to anticipate how to act in real-life situations.

“Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels.” (Elkind, 2007, p.4)
References


