

## Developing Learning through Play in a Kindergarten Classroom

Approved by Daniel Leitch

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Developing Learning through Play in a Kindergarten Classroom

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An Educational Project

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by

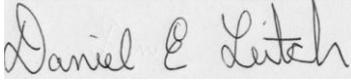
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The attached seminar paper, by Danielle Syse, entitled, Developing Learning through Play in a Kindergarten Classroom: An Educational Project, when completed, is to be submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science in Education

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction**

“Children explore their environments, adolescents engage in athletic competitions, and adults travel on vacations in hopes of experiencing the "new." Within social settings, like school, play can foster cooperative learning skills, adaptive abilities, and much more, allowing students to better handle situations throughout their lives” (Ortlieb, 2010).

When you think of play do you think of children learning? Most would answer that question with “No, they are just playing.” Children can learn general knowledge and social skills from play. School is new to most kindergarten students and not allowing play is putting a barrier between them and their learning. Students starting kindergarten begin to learn independence, self-esteem and how to become their own person. There are many different curriculums used in kindergarten classes around the world, but each one is focused on the student developing and learning. Play time is a critical part of this curriculum as it allows to the students to explore and develop.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Play in kindergarten classrooms is viewed to many people as just “play.” Most do not realize that children are actually learning as they play. In my experience I have been able to utilize play in my classroom, but there are some teachers, administrators and parents who think that school is all academic and no play. How is play structured in the classroom? How do children learn in the classroom? What is the importance of play in the classroom? These are a few of the questions I am looking to be answered.

#### **Method of Approach**

I will research the importance of play in a kindergarten classroom. Literature will be reviewed to determine what play really does for children in the classroom and how it

affects their development. I am hoping this research will help me create a play environment in my classroom that is appropriate for child development.

## Chapter 2 **Academics in a Kindergarten Classroom**

“A blend of both academic work and play is essential for a kindergarten child to learn. In this blended environment, children learn to love school” (Moore, 2011). When given the opportunity children will likely choose play over work, but what they do not realize is they are learning while they play. Kindergarten is becoming more academic driven than it used to be. Teachers are instructed to focus more on academics in their classrooms and not let students play. The academic driven classroom is encouraged by administration in many of the schools I have visited. Some teachers do not realize that learning comes from the play the students are engaging in.

According to Curwood’s article a lack of academic results in classrooms without play has led many to believe that learning occurs through play (Curwood, 2007). Teachers are able to incorporate the academics they are teaching into play so that children are still having fun and are still learning the concepts they need to be taught at the kindergarten level. Children need to have play each school day to develop social skills, gain cognitive development, and improve their communication skills.

“More children learning to read or do math sooner must be good. But these achievements may come at the expense of other skills children need to learn, such as self-reliance, problem solving, and spatial thinking” (Curwood, 2007). Students should have the option to learn in many different ways. An example of this is using a block center that can be both fun and also a math learning experience for children as they learn about different shapes and how they fit together. Although many kindergarten testing scores may be higher in recent years, it has not been shown that the intensified academic focus has been the cause of these results (Curwood, 2007). There are many ways teacher can help students stretch their imagination when playing so they can learn the skills that play teaches them.

When a teacher prompts a student to talk about what is going on in their play they are encouraging communication and developing language skills.

Childhood should not be considered only as a developmental stage but as a unique time in someone's life. "Childhood is a magical time, and play and playfulness create learning experiences that are not always neat, orderly, and easily scheduled. We need to communicate to others that childhood is more than just the process of preparing children for life" (Strickland, 2000). Strickland also states in his article that children who play are healthier in the aspects of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive health.

Psychologists have discovered that children of all age levels learn differently. Younger children tend to develop skills through make-believe play while older children can develop skills more appropriately through formal instruction (Leong & Bodrova, 2006). These discoveries provide support for the use of play in the kindergarten classroom. Research has looked at the philosophy of learning for different age groups and has come up with varying principles. The following principles for Early Literacy from psychologist Lev Vygotsky are as follows (Bodrova, Leong, & Norford, 2003);

1. Meet the child's learning and development needs
2. Support the child on constructing knowledge through social interactions
3. Amplify development rather than accelerate it
4. Consider development as a continuum of behaviors rather than as a single point on a scale
5. Scaffold children from assisted performance to independent performance
6. Engage students in activities that lead to developmental accomplishments

7. Use student assessment data to shape instruction.

These principles imply that children in a kindergarten classroom will benefit from using play as a learning tool based on their level of development.

### **Important Aspects of Play**

Play is important because it allows the child to develop skills they will use throughout life. These skills are developed early on in life and are aided in the classroom by the teacher and learning environment. Certain skills that children develop in a kindergarten classroom through play are social, physical and cognitive.

Play is an essential component in developing cognitive skills in young children. When children play they have the flexibility to use their imagination which allows them to be more capable of solving problems (Almy, 2000). The development of these problem solving skills are more likely to come out during child's play such as when they play with objects and realize what they can do with them. When children play they communicate with other students and their teachers which aids in building language skills. These skills are further developed by the classroom teacher questioning students about their play. Children gain language skills while playing by learning words that they have heard in books and making connections between spoken and written language (Almy, 2000).

During pretend play children encounter thinking skills to solve problems that may arise. Another way to develop language skills is to use print, this can be done by allowing students to write or read during play (Owocki, 1999). For example students in my classroom have the opportunity to play in "centers" during free play time. Centers are areas designated to encourage different types of play based upon materials, props, and staging. A specific center in my classroom is designated as a writing and coloring center where I provide my students with paper, pencils, crayons and scissors. During center time,

students have written letters to each other and made paper laptops with all the letters of the alphabet on them. The goals of the writing and coloring center are to encourage the use of letters, colors, and words for expression and communication. Students were excited and very proud of their accomplishments.

Social skills are another aspect of a child's development during play. In play children are often interacting with their classmates, this allows them to enjoy being around others. Sharing and taking turns are social skills that are learned through play in the classroom. The classroom teacher can reinforce these actions during play to further the child's development in these important social skills. I encourage sharing in my classroom by instructing students to take turns at different centers so everyone is able to experience them. While putting together puzzles students are encouraged by the teacher to take turns putting pieces in one at a time to complete the puzzle together. During play leaders can be developed as certain situations dictate a child to lead others in play. Children must also follow a system of rules which include "ways to control themselves and tolerate their frustrations in a social setting" (Perry, Bruce D. MD, PhD, 2001).

Coordination, strength, and balance are physical skills that occur during play. Building blocks and putting together puzzles help children develop coordination and fine motor skills that are very important in a child's development. Running and jumping during outside play are very important in building strength and improving balance which will be discussed further in the *Benefits of Outdoor Play* section.

Other important aspects of play were demonstrated in an article by Levin and Lobo. They stated that "through play children can develop an appreciation of similarities and differences in ways that connect directly to who they are and what they know about and try to sort out *what is and is not like me* and *what do the differences mean*" (Levin & Lobo, 2000)? In other words play allows children to discover what they like and dislike (Drew,

2001). Levin and Lobo believe that play is a powerful and safe way to learn about the world and provide the following examples:

1. Learn new concepts, explore new attitudes, and develop new skills.
2. Work out an understanding and mastery of potentially exciting, worrisome, and/or confusing experiences in their world, including safety and separation issues.
3. Transform their experiences into creations that are uniquely their own.
4. Build meaningful connections between their experiences at home, at school, and in the community.
5. Learn more about each other's families and diverse backgrounds (Levin & Lobo, 2000).

### **Structuring Play in the Classroom**

“Only by supporting mature, high quality play can we really help children fully develop their language and literacy skills” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003b). Teachers are the main supporters in developing high quality play. In child’s play teachers introduce language, provide props for make-believe play, and facilitate social interactions with other students.

Dramatic play allows children to develop their language and literacy skills. Dramatic play happens “through the fluid action and interaction of children as they disconnect from fixed classroom routines and take charge of their own behavior, time, and

space” (Strickland, 2000). A teacher should be sure to give the proper time and space for children to play in the classroom.

Children will also need props or materials to represent experiences in their play. Materials should help children create roles and also be based around various themes. With appropriate props, children can make connections in their own lives through play. During play children are more likely to explore things they are interested in, which allows them to make a better connection between home and school.

Dramatic play involves children pretending they are in recognizable situations or acting out familiar themes. These themes may include, playing house, being a firefighter, or even playing school. Teachers can help expand the idea of new themes in a classroom by taking field trips, having guest speakers, sharing books, and by helping children plan for play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a). Taking field trips into the community and having guest speakers come into a classroom allows children to see the roles these people have in the community. When sharing books in the classroom it opens up the opportunity for children to recreate the stories they hear and become part of that story during play. Another way for teachers to expand the ideas and themes of play is to help children plan for play by giving them materials and helping them organize the theme they will be acting out.

When structuring play, age is a factor that determines the type of play a child will engage in. In an article by Levin and Lobo they characterize the child’s development of play by age (Levin & Lobo, 2000). Children from infant to age two play by looking at each other and engaging by offering toys to one another, but not actually playing together. As children get older and approach the age of three they enjoy simple games and begin to play with other children. From age’s three to four, more complex games are played and stronger friendships are formed among their peers. Finally by ages four to six, children learn to take on roles during play and become independent and vary their types of play.

By the time children become school age they begin to engage in mature play which contributes to their learning and development. Mature play consists of characteristics that include imaginary situations, multiple roles, clearly defined rules, themes, language development, and a specific time frame (Bodrova & Leong, 2003b). In mature play, children exhibit multiple roles such as a patient and a doctor and learn about the interaction between the two roles. According to Bodrova and Leong, the teacher needs to take a large part in the development of mature play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003b). However, teachers can become too involved in developing mature play and thus interfering with a child's decision making. As teachers intervene with a child's play it is suggested that they indirectly help a child make choices and take away their creativity. Teachers are better suited at making subtle redirections for the child during play rather than making direct changes to their actions.

It is stated that children need at least 20 to 30 minutes of play to fully engage in play and allow the opportunity to develop oral language skills and literacy. When a child is given the chance to create an imaginary situation a teacher can help by offering props and model how to use them (Leong & and Bodrova, 2006). For example, blocks may not only be used to build, but also as a telephone when playing house.

“Effective play also enhances a child's self-regulatory behavior and helps them develop a sense of story-which is important to future reading” (Espinosa, 2002). When children are building with blocks they learn to improve their memory by remembering what they built. For example, if a block tower falls, the child can develop their memory skills by trying to rebuild it. When finished playing with blocks in my classroom, children learn the skill of matching and classifying as they put blocks away by sorting them by color, shape, and size. Children can also learn cause and effect, during play. Cause and effect happens when children paint and they accidentally mix two paints colors together to create

a new color. Children make many choices during their life and play is a wonderful opportunity to explore new ideas.

### **Benefits of Outdoor Play**

Outdoor play occurs multiple times throughout the day for a kindergarten student which includes before school, lunch, recess, physical education, and after school. Administration and teachers are able to provide students the opportunity for outdoor play during the school day, which may not be available to all students at home. Outdoor play includes children playing alone and being imaginative, as well as playing in groups and socially interacting with other students.

There are many benefits a child receives from outdoor play. One of these benefits includes improving health by promoting physical activity. After researching outdoor play, some common benefits of physical activity at all ages are improving cardiovascular health, promoting weight loss, and further development of muscle strengthening. Developing a healthy lifestyle at a young age will promote a lifelong commitment to physical activity and improved health (Little & Wyver, 2008).

Another benefit of outdoor play is to encourage students to experience the natural environment (Little & Wyver, 2008). Children can learn about the environment through playing with the components of the environment. Different ways to explore the environment and its components include playing in the dirt and finding worms, picking flowers, and climbing trees and finding a bird's nest. A different benefit of outdoor play is learning social interactions with other children through activities such as building a fort with classmates, and playing kickball and tag together.

The final benefits discussed in the article are developing physical skills. These skills include strength, balance, and coordination, also in younger children outdoor play can help

develop locomotor skills. Indoor play also helps develop these skills but children may have more freedom with their play outdoors developing the physical skills. They are able to perform tasks which require balancing such as walking on the balance beam, developing strength by crossing the monkey bars and coordination by climbing the jungle gym.

There are three types of physical play that typically occur outdoors in the article by Little and Wyver (Little & Wyver, 2008). Coaching is the first type of physical play where children learn a skill or attempt a physical activity with assistance from a teacher. An example of this would be learning to throw a frisbee during physical education class with instruction from the teacher. The second type of physical play is a form of dramatic play in which children perform physical activities such as a chasing game when children are pretending to be someone or something when chasing their classmates. The final type of physical play involves children challenging themselves with difficult and intense activities pushing the limits of their abilities. Examples of this type of physical play include climbing to the top of the playground or monkey bars, and pumping the swings as high as they are able to.

### **Plays Effect on Children with Disabilities**

Children with disabilities may need to be encouraged differently than other students when it comes to play. Play may not come natural for a student with disabilities and teachers must recognize this difference. Children with disabilities may develop skills to play and use props slower than other children. Teachers can allot extra time and opportunities for all children in a classroom so that children who take more time to develop skills learned during play have the available chances.

Developing play for a child with disabilities is different in that a child's IEP (Individualized Education Program) requires that goals be met. Play for these students

should enhance the opportunity for students to achieve their defined goals (Bingham, 2008). Teachers can model how the props can be used and show them what they can do with each them. Teachers can also play with the children to help model behaviors and encourage a child with disabilities to participate in play. The more comfortable a child becomes with play activities the more likely they will be to participate in them.

A strategy that teachers use is pairing a more reluctant child with disabilities to a child having more advanced play levels. This strategy of using peer support allows a classmate to model correct play behavior in the classroom (Bingham, 2008). Another strategy used by teachers is using an environmental support to facilitate learning through play. An example of this would be to place play objects near the designated area of which children will be playing with them. Specifically, in my classroom I have the dress-up clothes placed near the kitchen promoting the students to play house and dress the part they are playing.

Modifications to play are an essential action that a teacher can take in order to allow children with disabilities to improve their participation in play (Bingham, 2008). Certain modifications for play include changing the position a child must be in to participate. An example of this would be to move blocks from the floor to a table for a child that can't play with them at the floor level because of their disability. Another way to modify play is simplifying the steps of an activity and breaking them down into step-by-step directions for better understanding. Finally, play can be modified by changing the props. This can be done by using a bean bag instead of a ball for throwing and catching as a bean bag may be easier for a child with a disability to catch and throw (Carmichael, 1993).

In an article by Murata and Maeda recommendations for structuring play are given for students with developmental delays (Murata & Maeda, 2002).

1. Arrange the environment to engage preschoolers into various motor activities.
2. Allow preschoolers to explore and engage the physical activity environment through a guided discovery modality.
3. Collaborate/Consult with other personnel (e.g. classroom teachers, physical educators, speech language pathologists) relative to planning and implementing motor objects and activities for young children.
4. Allow preschoolers with a without development delays to interact.
5. Provide many colorful, large, visuals cues, and (if possible include sound).
6. Be patient in observing preschoolers interacting with the environment.
7. Change the environment (eg. Playground to gymnasium) to promote generalization.
8. Document the events or skills demonstrated as they occur.
9. Implement a home activity plan (HAP) in order to communicate with parents and caregivers about physical activity and skills.

## Chapter 3

### **Conclusion**

Play is an essential part of the kindergarten curriculum that allows a child to develop many lifelong skills. Despite the critics who believe play should not be incorporated into the classroom, research has shown that play is crucial in a child's development. The skills that a child develops include social, physical, and cognitive skills that are enhanced further with play. This research is not to discredit the importance of academics such as reading and math, but to highlight the important skill development that occurs through play.

Cognitive skills, such as language development, and social skills are learned through interacting and communicating with other children during play. Physical skills of strength, balance, and coordination in kindergarten children are also developed during play which includes indoor and outdoor play. Teachers help support child's play by introducing themes and helping facilitate interaction between students which leads to the development of these skills. It is also important for teacher to recognize the differences when it comes to encouraging play in children with disabilities. Teachers should use play as a tool for developing learning and also understand the importance of facilitating play in the classroom.

## Chapter 4

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were provided in the research as ways to help incorporate play in the classroom. A teacher should be sure to provide time for children to play in the classroom and allow for different types of play. Specifically, teachers should allow more time for children with disabilities to play. Not all children learn the same way, a teacher must be flexible so all children can benefit from play. Teachers may have to change the way they teach to create opportunities for children to learn through play and change the way they assess students by observing their play as an alternative to standardized tests (Miller, Almon, & Alliance, 2009).

While teachers observe child's play they are watching for the way children communicate, the language they are using, and how they interact with each other. For example, when observing a child to see if they have the appropriate language and communication skills I would look for the use of proper and complete sentences as well as their use of correct word selection. Teachers can evaluate the student further by observing these skills during play. It is suggested in the article by Miller and Almon that standard tests are prone to serious error when given to children under the age of eight (Miller et al., 2009).

In an article by Rolke she discusses eight ways to enrich play that were published in the book *Tools of the Mind* by Bedrova and Leong (Rolke, 2005). The eight ways are as follows along with examples of them into my classroom.

1. Provide uninterrupted time for play

I am able to give students the opportunity daily for play and set aside 20 to 30

minutes specifically for play. This allows my students to play freely without interruptions.

2. Help children plan play

While given the opportunity to play, there are times when children can't decide what they want to do. This allows me the opportunity to work with the student and come up with a plan or an idea for what they can play.

3. Monitor play activity

I monitor children's play daily and I am able to give students feedback and ideas of things they can do with specific props or materials in the classroom.

4. Provide props and toys

Many different types of props and toys are readily available in my classroom, and students have access to all during play time.

5. Provide broad themes

Toys and props in my room coincide with the theme we are studying. An example of this during our farm unit is having corn in the sensory table, farm stuffed animals on the shelves, and farm clothes in the dramatic play area for children to use.

6. Coach children who need help

During play I can provide coaching to children who are unsure of what to do or need help with ideas they have. I am able to give students ideas of what they can do with props, provide them with themed ideas, or further the development of their own ideas.

7. Model thematic play behavior

In my classroom I can show my students the themed items for the different centers and model how to use props that are provided.

8. Model problem solving

Modeling problem solving happens daily in a kindergarten classroom. A typical problem during play consists of students not agreeing on what they are going to play or their roles during play. I can model problem solving skills by facilitating discussions with each of the students and provide them choices or options that may work better. This modeling helps the students because I have noticed them trying to solve the problems themselves as they arise.

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