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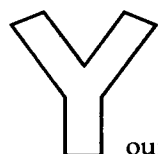
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Acknowledging Learning Through Play in the Primary Grades

On the first day of the new school year, Micah walks into his 2nd-grade classroom. He considers the rows of freshly polished desks, the neatly stacked workbooks, and the newly sharpened pencils on the shelf. Looking perplexed, he turns to his teacher and asks, "But where are the toys?"



ounger children are expected to be playful, and play generally is an acceptable activity in preschool classrooms (Wiltz & Fein, 2006). However, once children enter the primary grades (i.e., kindergarten through 3rd grade), time for play is often dramatically reduced (Bergen, 2002), leaving children like Micah wondering what happened to the toys.

Actually, Micah was one of the fortunate children. He had known the joy of learning through play during his kindergarten and 1st-grade years. For many children, textbooks and worksheets take over their lives beginning in kindergarten. Too often, parents, administrators, and teachers see the primary years as a time to get down to business and begin the *real* work involved in learning; play is considered a frill or add-on that has no place in the academic setting. Nevertheless, as Elkind (2007) proposes, "Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels" (p. 4). Furthermore, according to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), play is developmentally appropriate for primary-age children and can provide them with opportunities that enrich the learning experience.

Over a decade ago, Sandra J. Stone (1995) encouraged primary-grade teachers to incorporate play into their classrooms. Stone described the many ways children develop through their play and suggested that primary-age children have a need to play. Therefore, rather than educators giving into the thinking that play has

no place in the primary grades, Stone urged teachers to design classrooms that encourage play. Unfortunately, even after these many years, play continues to be a misunderstood aspect of primary-grade children's development and learning.

For educators who do see value in the play of primary-age children, the pressures of standardized testing and mandated instructional programs may compel them to forgo time for play. Primary-grade teachers who believe that play is an avenue for learning may be required to defend the inclusion of play in their classrooms. The authors of this article explore the learning that can occur when primary-age children are allowed to play, and they provide primary-grade teachers with information to support developing a playful environment for learning.

Criteria of Play

While various meanings are applied to play, researchers have found certain characteristics that are typical of play. According to Brewer (2007), play involves the following criteria: 1) intrinsic motivation to participate, 2) active involvement of players, 3) nonliteral meanings of the activity, 4) focus on participation rather than outcome, 5) meaning of activities and objects supplied by players, and 6) flexibility of rules. Activities that meet these characteristics are often found in settings for younger children; however, once children enter the primary grades, time set aside for play in the classroom tends to completely disappear.

Time for Play

According to Bergen (2002), little play research has been conducted in primary classrooms, possibly because there are so few primary classrooms in which children actually play or where children are allowed to engage in playful, learning activities. Teachers may feel pressured to focus on academic achievement and the preparation of children for testing and meeting curricular standards, using strategies that do not include play. Although primary-grade teachers may feel

pressured to prepare children for the inevitable testing, they should not overlook the “proper balance between spontaneous play and other activities” (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn, & Almy, 1987, p. 146).

Unfortunately, many teachers feel they no longer have the professional autonomy that once was a cornerstone of teaching (Mihans, 2008). Often, teachers no longer have the authority to make many of the instructional decisions that they believe will benefit their students. These decisions are made for the teachers, through mandated use of scripted instructional materials and programs, many of which require an overabundance of teacher-directed activities (National Kindergarten Alliance, n.d.). When every moment of the instructional day is preplanned, it is difficult for primary-grade teachers who believe that children’s play is an important part of the learning environment to justify the inclusion of play in the schedule. Nevertheless, the learning that takes place when children play must not be overlooked, and teachers can be advocates for the use of developmentally appropriate practices that include free play during the primary grades.

Play as an Avenue for Learning

The focus of highly structured instructional materials that have children sit and listen or engage in paper/pencil work tends to be basic factual learning (Brewer, 2007). For deeper levels of learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993), active involvement is needed. Additionally, education should focus on all aspects of a child’s development: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive. Requiring primary-grade children to sit and listen to the teacher, to complete the work provided by the teacher, and to do their “own” work without disturbing others overlooks the natural development of children and the social context conducive to learning.

Almost 30 years ago, David Elkind (1981) wrote that society, including schools, rushes children toward adulthood at the expense of their childhood. Adults within the school environment often pressure children to conform to standards that are not child-friendly. McEachron (2001) writes, “When children are not allowed to be children, stress is sure to follow” (p. 82). The brain’s ability to perform well is reduced when a child is under stress. Recent research into how the brain functions helps substantiate this idea (Jensen, 2006).

Classroom environments can be altered to decrease children’s stress levels. Play is an important avenue to providing a relaxed classroom environment (National Kindergarten Alliance, n.d.). Teachers can create environments that are more playful and less stressful by allowing children to make choices about their activities. Wolk (2007) suggests that allowing students to make decisions about what and how they learn helps them

to find the enjoyment that can come from learning. Furthermore, when children are given the freedom to make decisions, such as during play, they develop confidence in their growing abilities. This emerging confidence in young children plays a role in developing positive self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy Through Play

Self-efficacy is the belief that people can influence what happens in life through the actions they take; people with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to believe they are capable of having at least some control over what happens as they make decisions and take action on those decisions (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). This belief begins to develop in children as they are allowed to make choices and to do things for themselves. When children play, they develop the sense that they can have control over themselves and their environment (National Kindergarten Alliance, n.d.).

Wassermann (2000) uses the term “can-do” attitude to explain the self-efficacy that children can gain through play. During play, children make choices and see the outcomes of those choices within the safety of the play setting. In this way, they experience the cause and effect of their actions and learn to regulate their behaviors. If children are constantly told what to do and how to do it, they miss the opportunities to practice controlling their own actions. When children are allowed to make choices about the activities that they will pursue, they are more likely to learn to make wise choices.

Children construct their knowledge as they choose activities, discuss their ideas, and work together to solve problems that arise during play. Early childhood education is based on theories that learning is an active, social endeavor. Such theorists as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky believed that interaction is a key to learning (Mooney, 2000). The conversations that occur during interactive play awaken children to diverse ideas. By hearing and discussing different ideas, children see situations in new ways, thus deepening their understanding of concepts.

Literacy Skills Through Play

Children’s early experiences with language and literacy are key to their later learning (Hart & Risley, 1995; Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). Play allows for the practice of literacy skills. A critical part of literacy learning is language development. Very young children begin their path to later literacy learning as they hear and use language in their environment (Hart & Risley, 1995). Language provides the means for children to create play scenarios. Davidson (2006) suggests that “playing pretend pushes children to stretch their

language skills in a number of ways" (p. 37), such as determining the specific words and tone to use within the play scenario. Moreover, language allows children to interact with others, helping them to learn the expectations of their sociocultural environment (Mooney, 2000). As children play together, they develop their understanding of language and how it allows them to interact with people in their environment.

Although primary-age children tend to demonstrate a wealth of language abilities, they continue to develop oral language skills, which, in turn, helps them learn to read and write (Brewer, 2007). By the end of the primary grades, children are expected to be proficient readers and writers. As with very young children, primary-age children need time to hear new vocabulary and experiment with the language in order to build their understanding of the ways language works. Children's engagement in playful activities allows them to practice language skills with peers. Primary-grade teachers can encourage children in their enjoyment of and involvement with literacy by placing appropriate literacy materials into play centers. One study found that when kindergarten teachers included more literacy materials in all centers, the children engaged in a variety of literacy activities (Saracho, 2001). Centers can include materials for children to read, a variety of writing implements, and various sizes and colors of paper. Other materials that can be included in centers to encourage literacy play are magnetic letters to spell words, signs to read, word games, flannel boards with flannel cut-outs of book characters, and tape players with blank cassettes for children to record their own stories. Placing literacy materials within children's easy access encourages them as they develop literacy skills.

Mathematics and Science Learning Through Play

Piaget believed that learning occurs when children are curious and interact with the materials in their environment (Mooney, 2000). Children's curiosity leads them to choose activities that have meaning for them and about which they want to know more. Through exploring their environment with their curious natures, children build their knowledge of the world around them.

Primary-age children are typically in transition between what Piaget called the preoperational stage and the concrete operational stage (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). During this transition phase, the materials available for children to use can assist in their initial understandings of mathematical and scientific concepts (Gallenstein, 2003). For example, playing with puzzles helps children understand spatial concepts, and play with pattern blocks helps children make discoveries about geomet-

ric shapes (e.g., three triangles placed together make the shape of one trapezoid). Exploring with magnets allows children to experiment with magnetic force and begin to understand that metals have different properties. When primary-grade children have these types of materials available to choose from, they gain the ability to understand abstract mathematical and scientific concepts that they can use throughout their lives (Elkind, 2007).

Social Skills Through Play

A vital task for educators is helping children to develop the social skills necessary to live in society and effectively associate with other people. Sitting quietly and working alone on a task does not allow children to develop a genuine understanding of social skills; internalizing accepted social behaviors requires interaction. Play is a natural way for children to interact. Much of the research conducted on children's play describes the social processes that develop (e.g., Boulton, 2005; Gagnon & Nagle, 2004; Pellegrini, Blatchford, Kato, & Baines, 2004). Children learn important social expectations as they play with each other. The social skills that are often practiced when children play together are numerous; for example, opportunities for cooperating, taking turns, sharing, listening, and negotiating exist within the play context (Spodek & Saracho, 1998). Primary-age children may take on roles during sociodramatic play in which they play out their own life experiences (e.g., "I'm the mommy. You're the baby, and you have to stay in the car with Daddy while I go into the store."). The negotiation of who takes what role during play and how that person must act within the play scenario provides children practice with conflict-resolution skills and with understanding various points of view (Monaghan-Nourot, 2006).

Furthermore, the social aspect of play allows primary-age children to practice specific skills that are usually required in primary curricula. Sociodramatic play offers many opportunities for learning. For instance, children learn the value of specific coins and bills within the context of playing store. Children learn new vocabulary and measuring skills as they "build" a cardboard spaceship to take them to the moon, and a pretend restaurant leads to reading and writing skills when children create menus.

Additionally, many children of primary-grade age have advanced to playing games with rules (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Children who play board games practice such skills as adding, subtracting, reading words, and analyzing possibilities. Primary-age children may re-create rules for games that already have established rules (e.g., chase or board games). For example, in a simple spinner counting game in which the rule is for each person to have one turn before the next person

spins, the children may decide to allow each person two spins before passing the turn to the next person. The conversations that emerge as children invent game rules provide opportunities for them to express their ideas, analyze and discuss various options for the game, and negotiate with each other (e.g., "If you'll play with me, I'll let you go first").

Conclusion

The beginning scenario illustrates that children like Micah often enter into primary classrooms where the tools of play are missing, and this will continue unless advocates for play work diligently to change the status quo and provide an environment in which play and playful learning experiences are woven back into the classrooms for the children. As Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2001) note, "The shift in focus from make-believe play of the preschooler to the growing frequency of playing organized games of the school-age child should transition gradually, with continual attention to providing play materials and equipment for cognitive, social, and language development through the primary grades" (p. 434). This type of play-based learning within a curriculum focuses more "on imaginative expression of ideas and open-ended experimentation" (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001, p. 300), both of which allow children to learn to think critically and solve problems strategically.

Learning and play do not have to be contradictory; learning can occur during times of play. When children transition into the primary grades, they should not have to leave their childhoods behind. Appropriate instructional practices are as necessary in the elementary grades as they are in the preschool years. By examining the learning that takes place when children are allowed to make choices, encouraged to explore new materials and ideas, and given freedom to interact with one another, primary-grade teachers can better advocate for play as appropriate and effective for children's learning and development.

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