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LET OUR CHILDREN PLAY: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Julie Kessel has 10 years of experience working with children as a preschool teacher for both the Head Start and Bright Horizon organizations. Additionally, Julie has served children and families as a Parent's as Teachers instructor for three years through the Head Start home visiting program. Julie's most recent accomplishment consists of being a self-published author of the children's book "Bling, Blang, Blee. I am Me," a book dedicated to an area that she is passionate about, inclusion. Currently, Julie is finishing coursework for an Ed.D. in Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education at the University of Montana.

Introduction

As you peer into Ms. Tammy's Head Start classroom you are welcomed with the sight of seventeen three-year old's that are loud, busy, and engaged throughout the classroom environment. This observation brings forth questions that Ms. Tammy often hears from adults such as, "why do you let them play all day?" and "when do they learn?" In this paper, these questions will be addressed by explaining how children learn through play in an early childhood setting, why it is a rich environment to learn, what constructive play means, and by providing information for adults to understand the importance of play in an early childhood setting.

Background/Problem

Education comes in many forms. However, most people today only know education to be a stringent execution of memorizing facts. Society should not be blamed for viewing education as a teacher-led, large group instruction time, while the students are to retain the "important" facts. Instead, society should be educated on why play-based pedagogy is the best way for young children to learn during their early years of life. Almon and Miller (2011) explain that "the pushing down of the

elementary school curriculum into early childhood has reached a new peak with the adoption by almost every state of the so-called common core standards” (p.1). Papademetri-Kachrimani (2015) also argues that “the worst about school curriculum is the fragmentation of knowledge into little pieces that are supposed to make learning easy, but often ends up depriving knowledge of personal meaning” (p. 1). This paper will explain through research-based materials that just because facts are more easily taught through large group instruction, this does not make it the best way to instruct in the early years of life. We will also examine the constructivist approach of learning, and how this hands-on approach can educate our children of these same facts as the traditional approach, but in engaging and meaningful ways.

What is the Constructivist Theory?

Imagine being taught in a classroom where the children sang and danced to learn the alphabet. One where the students engage with nature and collect natural items to sort and count for mathematics. Daily interactions are viewed by peers as they take care of the plants in the classroom to learn about life science. In these cases, the children are learning valuable information, while building a variety of other skills as they are doing it. These are examples of the constructive approach. The constructivist approach is explained by Kostelnik, Soderman, Whiren, and Rupiper (2015) by stating that, “children are holistic beings whose development and learning are influenced both by biology and children’s interactions with the physical world and other people” (p. 33). In this environment, children are given the opportunity to learn naturally as they engage with experiences and master new skills.

The constructivist approach in pedagogy is influenced by the theorist, Lev Vygotsky. Lev Vygotsky’s theory is based on the idea that children learn from both the environment and the social interactions they have in the classroom. Mooney (2006) explains Vygotsky’s most important theory, *the zone of proximal development (ZPD)*, by saying “when a child is on the edge of learning a new concept they can benefit from the interaction with a teacher or a classmate” (p. 83). Both the constructivist theory and ZPD complement each other as they view interactions in the classroom in a holistic approach. This also suggests that it is highly important to be an intentional teacher through conversation while creating a play based environment. Mooney (2006) went on to share that teachers can scaffold children’s learning by placing materials in the environment that challenges them. Through Vygotsky’s theory, we were also provided with the importance of observing for assessment purposes because they are the most accurate way to learn about children’s development. Last, Vygotsky believed

that interactions between peers and students encourage growth in social, language, and cognitive growth.

Meaningful play

To bring awareness to the importance of play-based education, invite these questioning adults to explore the classroom. Explain to them how being an intentional teacher in the early childhood realm contributes to setting up a play based environment for learning. Epstein (2014) explains, “an intentional teacher aims at clearly defined learning objectives for children, employs instructional strategies likely to help children achieve the objectives, and continually assess progress and adjusts the strategies based on that assessment” (p. 5). As they tour the environment, point out the materials that are laid out for the students to engage with. Explain to the adult that a play based classroom does not engage the students in just “any play”. However, as Gronlund (2010) points out, the children should be engaged in a purposeful play, one that is set up for specific objectives, a mature style of playing where the children can engage, interact, and tell stories of what they are engaged in (p. 7). A study conducted in Australia by Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2011) supports the idea that there are different forms of play which should be used harmoniously in an early childhood setting. The article goes on to explain that of sixteen teachers in the study, fifteen of these teachers found academic results through the use of three different forms of play-based strategies: open-ended play, modeled play, and purposefully framed play. Through these studies, it proves that play in early childhood pedagogy is complex. The teachers interviewed state that it is important to allow your students to engage in open-ended play, which is described as having no teacher instruction with the materials provided in the classroom. Modeled play which is materials that the teachers introduce and instruct how to use it before it is placed in the environment. Also, purposefully framed play is where the teacher has an objective in mind while the child interacts with the materials. Using child initiated and teacher initiated play the students can learn concepts on their own through exploration, or be guided through peer and/or teacher assistance.



Developmentally Appropriate

Play-based learning is developmentally appropriate for young children. As we think back to the scene of seventeen-three-year old children engaged and busy in the classroom, we also observe children who are content in exploring and learning through play in their early childhood classroom. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) state that “the brain’s cerebral cortex and the functions that ultimately regulate children’s attention and memory are not fully developed” (p. 132). Therefore, if we were to change these children’s environment to one that is high pressured, and teacher directed, the atmosphere would have looked totally different. One where the children are not content and engaged, but possibly negative behaviors are being seen because they are not developmentally capable of sitting for long periods of time. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) also state that “play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence” (p. 14). One of the biggest reasons why early childhood classrooms are designed for hands-on play experiences is that children will not develop the love of learning if they do not receive enjoyment in what they are doing.



Brain Development

To gain a deeper reasoning to why hands-on play-based learning is essential to young children's success we need to consider the development of the brain. Feldman (2012) shares with us that the brain is the fastest growing part of the body in the first part of a human's life, stating "by the age of five a child's brain is only 90 percent of an average adult brain's weight, compared to a two-year old's brain which is only three fourths the size" (p. 199). Feldman (2012) also explains how the brain is growing as well. A baby is traditionally born with more neurons in the brain than what they will ever need. However, if used and communicated with through the synapsis, the less the brain will prune unused neurons. Therefore, the more hands-on experiences a child has early on in life, the stronger a child's brain will be. Rushton (2011) examines the growth of preschool children who are immersed in a play based childhood classroom. From his findings, he came up with four principles which support the importance of play in the early childhood years. The first two principles support the concept that the brain is growing and organizing. The third principle is linked to positive emotions. The last principle Rushton (2011) mentions is that "children's brains need to be immersed in real-life, hands-on, and meaningful learning experiences."

Conclusion

Looking closer at Ms. Tammy's class of seventeen-three-year old children, a person educated in early learning and child development practices would see an engaged classroom housed with busy children who are learning through a variety of domains. Each area of the environment is thoughtfully laid out with learning centers consisting of dramatic play, blocks, mathematics, science, literacy, writing, art, listening, manipulatives, and sensory experiences. Play-based learning is essential for the developmental growth of the child and its developing brain. Play-based learning is meaningful in all domains as they work together in a holistic approach. In short, play-based learning is fun for all, and to build a lifelong learner, it is important to allow a child to appreciate and enjoy the act of learning rather than being miserable and stuck at a desk as they are receiving large group instruction.

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