Chapter 19

Play-Based Literacy Instruction: Interactive Learning in a Kindergarten Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Too often, young children in kindergarten spend their time on worksheets and paper and pencil tasks, rather than being given developmentally appropriate instruction that incorporates active learning and play. This study explores the relationship between dramatic play and vocabulary development in an urban kindergarten classroom. We report on data from six culturally and linguistically diverse students, who participated in play-based vocabulary instruction. The findings suggest that dramatic play with teacher involvement helped participants’ vocabulary gains. The study findings suggest the potential benefit of dramatic play. The authors offer recommendations, and explain challenges and limitations of the study.

INTRODUCTION

It was three o’clock and school was over for the day. Five-year old students stream out of Bay Bridge Elementary (BBE) school (pseudonym), book bags full of papers, having spent the large part of the day working in their seats, pencils in hand, filing out worksheets. Too often, young children in kindergarten spend their time on worksheets and paper and pencil tasks, rather than being given developmentally appropriate instruction that incorporates active learning and play. While there is ample research on the important link between play and children’s learning and healthy development, play has drastically declined or in some cases disappeared from urban kindergarten classrooms (Han, Roskos, Vukelich & Buell, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAECY) has described the disappearance of play in kindergarten as a “crisis” (NAECY, 2009; 2010).

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Prompted by federal pressure (e.g., No Child Left Behind, now the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), funding for education has focused on instructional methods and practices that are presumed to work across school settings, teachers, and students. The disappearance of play disproportionately impacts students in urban schools, where scripted “teacher-proof” curriculum has replaced developmentally appropriate literacy instruction (Milner, 2013). The top-down implementation of a scripted literacy curriculum focuses “attention on explicit sets of instructional practices, rather than principles of instruction or pedagogical beliefs and frameworks” (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010, p. 386). As Bartolome (1994) argues, this “methods fetish” limits teacher autonomy, discretion, and creativity—thus restricting culturally and linguistically responsive practices that invite students to co-construct learning (p. 174). Narrow, proscribed curriculum that stresses rote learning of discreet skills denies many students, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, opportunities to use their language in support of their literacy learning. We agree with Swadener’s (1995) observation that rather than “getting the child ‘ready’ for school, [the emphasis should be on], getting the school ready” to serve increasingly diverse students (p. 18). Preparing schools to better service CLD students will require creating inclusive classroom spaces that make room for all of the cultural and linguistic resources students bring to school.

The co-authors, a university teacher educator (Afra), and a classroom teacher-researcher (Jessica), collaborated to systematically study the inclusive space created through a kindergarten play-based literacy curriculum unit in the context of an urban classroom. Implementing this pilot curriculum required Jessica to “negotiate” with her principal in order to “try” a 4-week play-based literacy instruction unit rather than the required scripted curriculum. Our goal was to foster a culturally responsive teaching classroom that valued students’ language and literacy practices and supported their literacy development. We implemented extensive play-centers during literacy instruction and conducted a teacher action research study to examine the following research question: What influence does a play-based curriculum have on the literacy development of kindergarten students?

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

The term developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) has been around in early childhood education literature since the 1980s and has gained wide acceptance around the world (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Nicholson, Bauer, & Wooley, 2016; Wood & Bennett, 1998). Developmentally appropriate practice perspectives have three core concepts: sensitivity to the developmental stages of children; recognition that all aspects of child development are important and interdependent, and an emphasis on an appropriate curriculum that is sensitive to the developmental needs of the child (Bredekamp, 1987; Wood & Bennett, 1998). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation guidelines for early childhood education have an extensive focus on DAP, highlighting the value of learning through play and the teacher’s role in facilitating learning (NAEYC, 2009).

Despite the widespread acceptance of DAP approaches to early childhood education and play-based literacy instruction, the move to state accountability systems and the pressure to produce academic outcomes placed pressure to produce academic performance in kindergarten. One consequence of the increased academic pressure on kindergarten has been its expansion; since 2002, kindergarten has shifted from half-day programs, with focus on social-emotional development and play-based instruction, to full-day programs for 5-year-olds. In addition, time for play in kindergarten has diminished and a greater emphasis is placed on preparing young children to meet ever higher standards and standardized
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