

The Academic Benefits of a Play-Based Pedagogy in Elementary Education

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Abstract: Children learn naturally through exploring their environment. There are many academic benefits for young children in a play-based classroom. The benefit of play supports children's development in five domains: physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive. Teachers can support a deeper level of learning by implementing a play-based learning classroom. A teacher's perspectives and roles have a significant impact on their student's learning. There are many innovative types of play that can be implemented in the classroom. When children can make choices in their learning it will indirectly increase their cognitive academic skills. Play is holistic and supports the whole child and their individual needs.

Introduction

Play is an integral part of young children's development and researchers are proving there are "ample academic gains achieved through play" (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p. 129). It promotes children's healthy brain development and enhances aspects of learning such as problem-solving and motor skills. A play learning environment is a child-centered pedagogy that emphasizes the development of children by allowing them to explore and inquire about what interests them. The play-based pedagogy also provides children with an expansive volume of academic benefits in their elementary education. These classrooms provide children with natural and rich experiences in a play-based learning environment. Children will become confident in their abilities while learning more mature concepts within their everyday play. Play accommodates children's individual needs and improves children's memory and ability to focus.

Play is a prodigious asset for children's development and highlights the "critical importance that children play and learn about the world with relevance, authenticity, and developmentally appropriate opportunities" (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020, p. 9). Play is holistic and enhances children's mental and emotional well-being, social interactions, and physical challenges (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). The purpose of this manuscript is to identify the academic benefits of a play-based pedagogy in elementary education. Contemporary researchers have found that symbolic play enhances children's verbal comprehension and expressive language abilities (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022). Children are natural explorers and learn by manipulating things in their environment. Play-based learning supports academic goals and learning standards by providing children the opportunities to explore, discover, investigate, and problem-solve.

Concept of Play

A play-learning environment is a child-centered pedagogy that emphasizes the development of children by allowing them to explore and inquire about what interests them. Providing children with a holistic learning environment enables them to grow in a safe environment with their peers. Young children will feel more at ease to express themselves, discover and investigate their surroundings, and build relationships with their peers. Early childhood teachers can provide these learning experiences by adopting and implementing play-based pedagogy. Researchers note that “early childhood settings become an extraordinary space for this natural and holistic learning to occur” (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020, pp. 9-10). Preparing a play-based classroom is an important task for all early childhood teachers. Play accommodates children’s individual needs. This type of setting will help students build upon their prior learned knowledge with confidence (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Play pedagogy has been a focus of early childhood education for decades. Constructivist educational theorists believe that through play children will uncover their intelligence through their discoveries.

Teacher’s Perspectives and Roles

Through play, young children learn the basics of reading, writing, math, and science through sensory activities (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Students can achieve success while manipulating materials along with socializing with their peers in the classroom. Teachers need to prepare young children for admittance into early childhood education with the important foundations of play (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) supports a teacher’s role in scaffolding students to a higher level of learning. Teachers can provide support for new ideas and methods within the ZPD to encourage students to engage in a higher level of thinking within the play world and the real world (Edwards, 2017). It is imperative to implement a successful learning curriculum to allow young children the opportunities to become successful in their early years of instruction. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports ZPD by explaining how a play-based learning environment can support a higher level of engagement and motivation for students’ academic success in later grades (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Early childhood classrooms provide children with spontaneous play and the opportunity to interact educationally. These settings enhance a well-balanced growth of learning and development through these exploratory venues. Early childhood theorists believe that young children’s education settings should be child-centered along with both active and interactive activities.

Teachers can provide intentional teaching within a play-based learning environment which provides ample opportunities to support children in various ways. Scaffolding children in play enhances children’s learning experiences during teachable moments. During these purposeful play experiences, teachers can engage reciprocally with their students which enhances their language interactions, and scaffolding concept development (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Teachers and children interact together in projects of social, cultural, political, and economics. When children are afforded these rich play experiences through their interests, it will support

their cognitive skills in later school years. Teachers can provide a flexible learning environment to support learning with appropriate teaching materials. Teachers need to utilize appropriate resources to stimulate children's interest in learning within the play-based classroom. Teachers can provide learning experiences that help children respond to new challenges within their environment (Edwards, 2017). Learning experiences should be adaptive to help students relate to and respond to their learning experiences. Children utilizing their imagination helps them make meaning of their world. Therefore, teachers can provide children with these academic opportunities with manipulatives for exploration and experimentation. Teachers can model purposeful learning by discussing and making connections with prior and newly learned knowledge with their students.

Older research developed by Engelmann and colleagues in the 1960s has supported the didactic approach which involves a greater focus on a teacher-directed approach during the whole group in systematic and assessment-driven instruction (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022). However, new research conducted using the Peabody picture vocabulary test 4th edition and the I-Ready diagnostic identified "the significant impacts of purposeful play detected in the current study along with prior supporting research for purposeful play, kindergarten teachers should consider infusing play-based pedagogy into their daily routines, especially when serving students living in poverty" (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022, p. 128). Classrooms provide children with natural and rich experiences in a play-based learning environment. Preparing a play-based classroom is an important task for all early childhood teachers. Play pedagogy has been a focus of early childhood education for decades.

Different Types of Play

Free play supports children's growth in personal and social skills. Pyle et al. (2018) observed "students engaging in oral language development in their play as they built storylines together, negotiated peer conflicts, and talked about their play" (p. 121). During the study, observations noted that children were actively engaged in oral language when building with legos. Foulds and Bucuvalas (2019) furthermore state that the "Sesame Workshop and The Lego Foundation launched Play Every Day, a multi-country project aimed at empowering caregivers to leverage play in support of children's early development and lifelong learning and to contribute to global understanding of best play practices as an integral part of daily life" (p. 18). The development of rich oral language development is important for setting the foundation of more complex language skills. Oral language development is a precursor to reading and writing skills. Providing children with a rich literacy environment supports their literacy development.

Guided play is a purposeful play that is a combination of specific learning goals and the enjoyment of play. Allee-Herndon et al. (2022) explain "the goal of purposeful, or guided play, play is to combine a focus on specific learning goals related to standards with the joyfulness of children's autonomy to choose and is influenced by constructivist theory" (p. 120). Guided play is another effective approach to learning. Pyle et al. (2018) define guided play as child-centered and the teacher interacts with her students. It is noted that guided play has a bigger impact on children's academic learning.

Guided play should be developed to support the development of the whole child which allows for active manipulation of learning materials to scaffold children's learning experiences and their interests within their environment. Allee-Herndon et al. (2022) clarify and defines guided-play classrooms are not intended solely for play, they encourage children to challenge themselves, reflect upon their understandings and knowledge, develop, and become aware of their interests, needs, and talents by making connections as they develop self-efficacy.

Role play and pretend play can also support children's academic growth (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Teachers can create stations to allow students to put on a play and reenact scenes from story books or imaginative play with their peers to provide positive social interactions and vocabulary development. These rich experiences support children's reading and writing skills in authentic ways and should always be included in children's play (Pyle et al., 2018). Drama play supports children's social and emotional development and enhances their oral and speech development.

It is recognized that play benefits children's progress and growth in five developmental domains language, social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Pyle et al., 2018). Imaginary play stimulates healthy brain development and supports each child's development within the five developmental domains. Purposeful play can ensure each child receives an equal education as their higher-income peers because they are all receiving the same rich learning experiences. This view established a research-based theory for the greater need for a play-based pedagogy in the primary grades (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Purposeful play with expectations can enhance students' learning development. Through play, children learn about their environment and how to interact with their peers.

Science education within the early childhood years has shown a positive link between imagination in science and imagination in play. A block station supports children's exploration of science, technology, engineering, and math. Fleer (2019) explains how teachers can create imaginative scientific situations for students to work on their scientific problem-solving skills. Fleer (2019) conducted a case study involving three preschool teachers and twenty-six children, six weeks of observations that generated 59.6 hours of digital observations and 788 photographs of these play experiences. A Scientific Playworlds model emerged as a possible model that teachers can implement science through the imagination of play into their play-based settings (Fleer, 2019).

Play Supports Social and Emotional Development

Play-based learning has many benefits and supports children's social and emotional development. The sociocultural theory and Vygotsky's work included learning through play as a social process. Play is holistic and supports children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020) state "learning through play develops children's health, imagination, social-emotional competencies, language skills, and physical capacities" (p. 12). These authors explain how learning through play enhances children's social-emotional skills independently and with their peers.

Play is important for children's social norms and children are enriched with social-emotional experiences through play. Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020) state

“when children engage in complex socio-dramatic play, they have the opportunity to develop their language and social skills, empathy, imagination, self-esteem, self-control, and higher levels of thinking” (p. 12). Purposeful play provides many social-emotional and cognitive benefits. Researchers and practitioners have identified purposeful play to enhance children’s developing minds, reduce stress, and build critical social-emotional skills.

The concept of play teaches children social interaction and increases their interest and motivation. Game-based learning supports positive learning behaviors and prosocial behaviors. Play is imperative for children to explore their surroundings, and ideas, experiment with materials and manipulatives, be social and emotional, along with being active and engaging with their peers. Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020) state “children who develop positive self-images will become well prepared for school and life” (p. 13). Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020) describe “play is important in helping children to develop later life skills such as social interaction and emotional competency” (p. 13). Cultural variations in learning have an impact on children’s social interactions through play.

Research has clearly distinguished that play is an integral part of children’s early childhood development. Foulds and Bucuvalas (2019) state “research has shown that playful learning helps foster the development of young children and lay the foundations for them to become creative, engaged, and lifelong learners” (p. 17). The Sesame Street show provided activities that were designed for caregivers and parents to interact with their children which supported social and emotional development (Foulds & Bucuvalas, 2019). Play is defined as purposeful that enhances children’s social and cultural worlds through complex interactions and reciprocity. Play enhances children’s social and emotional skills by developing skills of self-regulation, empathy, cooperation, and turn-taking. Free play allows a child to develop their social and emotional skills. Play supports children’s social skills by using their communication skills, routines of conversation, use of their oral vocabulary, experiences, and interactions with their peers.

Play-Based Pedagogy Challenges

As a result of more academic standardized testing, today’s teachers face the challenge of teaching structured academic rigorous tasks while play in the classroom disappears (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022). The increasing demands and pressures placed on teachers to reach literacy milestones before students proceed to the subsequent grade have impaired the play-based pedagogy implementation by forcing a more didactic approach to learning (Pyle et al., 2018; Allee-Herndon et al., 2022). Play naturally occurs in childhood but research focusing on early childhood development was scarce until the twentieth century.

Due to the increasing demands placed on state-mandated tests, it is important to return to a play-based pedagogy. After the legislation of No Child Left Behind (2001), there was a shift in the methods of teaching and assessing learning (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022). It is important to recognize the whole child for academic growth. More direct instruction is utilized in the classroom to meet the demands placed on learning standards to pass standardized tests. Parents have become more concerned with academic grades versus allowing children to naturally learn what

interests them. Allee-Herndon et al. (2022) study conducted on play implementation identified fifty-seven percent of participants acknowledged that parents are a significant barrier in their play-based learning. Supporting these findings, participants acknowledged the misconceptions that parents believe rich learning and engagement cannot be derived from play. Studies have identified that children will learn by exploring, discovering, and investigating materials in a prepared and planned environment (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Play-based learning supports academic goals and learning standards.

Conclusion

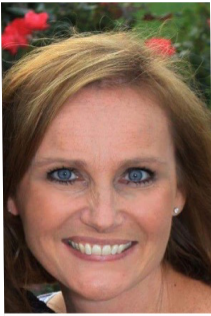
In conclusion, a play-based pedagogy has a tremendous number of benefits for children's learning. Unfortunately, this pedagogy is not widely used, and most classrooms are more teacher-child-directed learning. Combining children's developmental needs with the teachers' goals for student growth and retention is imperative for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to be aware of the importance of implementing a play-based pedagogy in early childhood classrooms (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). It is important to continue researching the importance of supporting the movement back to a play-based pedagogy in the classroom.

The play-based pedagogy provides all children the opportunity to challenge themselves, reflect on their own understanding, and explore what interests them while connecting with their peers (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). The academic learning standards can be included and accomplished through play-based learning. Children learn through play, they grow through these interactions, and they love to participate and observe others within their environment. The classroom should be a fun and interactive place for children to learn.

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About the Author

Mary Anne Langton holds a B.A. in Elementary Childhood Education. She is currently obtaining her M.Ed. in Elementary Childhood Education and will be graduating on May 5, 2023 from the University of Toledo. Mary Anne has a passion to teach young children and is excited to teach full-time.