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Balancing Free Play and Structured Learning Opportunities in Early Childhood Education Classrooms: Contrasting Perceptions of Teachers and Researchers

by

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Abstract

This study explored how early childhood education classrooms can provide a balance of learning opportunities that are both initiated by the child and facilitated by the teacher. Three transitional/preschool teachers were interviewed along with two researchers who study preschool/kindergarten classrooms. The results of this study found four strategies that are used in early childhood education classes that allow both child exploration and adult facilitation: 1) creating close teacher-child relationships; 2) creating close lead-assistant teacher relationships; 3) using both mental and physical planning; 4) using guided questions to teach. There were interesting differences in contrasting perspectives of early childhood education teachers and researchers, especially with regard to the role of social relationships.

Keywords: early childhood education, child-initiated, relationships, teacher-directed, guided play

Early childhood education has taken a turn towards a strict, academically focused, curriculum and away from more developmentally appropriate practices (Bassok et al., 2016). Preschoolers and children in kindergarten are having play time taken away in preference for worksheets and academic skill development exercises. Subjects like art and music are being taught less and less. This trend has been increasing steadily throughout the years. The debate between child-initiated and teacher-directed practices has been called into light. Child-initiated practices involve minimal teacher intervention, as they allow the children to choose their own activities. The teacher steps back as the kids are allowed to play and interact with different activities offered in the classroom at their own pace. Teacher-directed practices are the opposite. The teacher takes a step forward and guides all the children through one activity at a time. These activities tend to be more academic in nature compared to the play-based activities offered in child-initiated practices. Past research used to argue between which practice was more beneficial. However, recent scholars state that it is neither one nor the other, but a combination of both practices that make up the ideal teaching method (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Unfortunately, with the current trend towards teaching more academics, teacher-directed practices are becoming increasingly popular in early education classrooms (Bassok et al., 2016). An increase in teacher-directed practices with kids as young as three can lead to higher levels of school burnout and overall negative feelings associated with school. In addition, they are lacking the play time needed for their development of non-academic skills such as communication and social skills.

Teacher-directed practices

Whole-class activities set up by the instructor are classified as teacher-directed practices. The use of worksheets and textbooks are typically categorized under this classification. During a study which compared kindergarten classrooms from 1998 and 2010, they found that the "daily use of textbooks in kindergarten more than doubled for both reading and math" (Bassok et al., 2016). This suggest that the use of teacher-directed practices in kindergarten have also doubled, as the use of textbooks are a great indicator of the practice. The significance of "reading and math" subjects is their inclusion in the state testing that derived from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). "Reliance on high-stakes standardized tests, pressure[s] teachers to train successful test takers at ever younger ages" (Nicolopoulou, 2010). NCLB has placed pressure on teachers to prepare their students for state testing, and thus have prioritized teacher-directed practices in order to increase academic instruction.

While teachers have a major role in facilitating kindergarten, they are not the only ones with influence. Similarly to NCLB's effect on kindergarten, parents are also expecting higher levels of school readiness from their children. A study which compared parental notions of kindergarten from 1993 and 2007 found "substantial increases in parental reports of child academic development [...][with] little change in basic indicators of parental effort" (Belfield & Garcia, 2014). The main way to measure "academic development" is through testing and skill performance. However, parents were recorded to have "little change" in effort. Due to parent's increased expectations, while simultaneously offering no extra support for their children, the responsibility goes back to the teachers. This pressure has been recorded as a study "documented especially pronounced increases in the percentage of teachers who rated academic skills as important for school readiness" (Bassok et al., 2016). Academic instruction is taught through

structured activities. With higher demands from teachers, parents, and state policies, teacher-directed practices have become the answer.

Teacher-directed practices, while encouraged by adults, has the greatest effect on the children. One study found that "there were differences between children's unenthusiastic views of writing within the context of structured classroom activities that afforded them little if any agency, and their self-initiated engagement in writing practices" (Breathnach et al., 2017). While "writing" was occurring in both contexts, the children's view of the activity was vastly different depending on the delivery. Teacher-directed writing was associated with "unenthusiastic views" compared to the alternative "self-initiated" writing activity. Children's negative views associated with teacher-directed practices could indicate higher levels of school burnout if the practice is increased at earlier ages.

Child-initiated practices

When children are given the opportunity to play and explore with limited adult-created constraints, they are involved in child-initiated practices. When engaged in child-initiated practices "children played in unique ways to generate and extend ideas, acting out their intentions, seeking and initiating further possibilities, sometimes collaboratively, thus sustaining their play" (Craft et al., 2012). They used their imaginations and creativity by thinking of "further possibilities" and "extend[ing] ideas." Child-initiated practices are seen to support and encourage richer levels of thinking and exploration during play.

Furthering exploration can be seen in a study by Yu and colleagues (2018) that presented a novel toy to four and five-year-olds. One group received direct instruction ("You push this button."), while the other group of children received a pedagogical question ("What does this

button do?"). They found that "pedagogical questions and direct instruction achieved similar effectiveness in transmitting knowledge" (Yu et al., 2018). Both groups of children were able to press the button, whether they were told to directly or were simply questioned about the button; however, "children explored more after a pedagogical question compared to direct instruction: They played longer [...], attempted more unique actions [...], and discovered more build-in, non-target functions" (Yu et al., 2018). While both methods allowed the child to achieve the "target function," the child-initiated approach allowed for more discoveries and higher interest levels. The pedagogical question offered more agency and control to the child, and thus they felt more need to explore it themselves, rather than solely relying on the adult's knowledge of the toy.

Children are more likely to enjoy themselves and explore in child-initiated practices compared to teacher-initiated practices. Unfortunately, child-initiated practices have their downfalls. In a completely child-dominated setting, the teacher is no longer shaping their learning. "It is important to devise educational practices that can systematically integrate the play element into the preschool curriculum in ways that promote learning and development" (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Free play, while beneficial, does not always support learning. The middle ground between child-initiated play and teacher-directed practices is to "systematically integrate the play" into the lessons. By integrating play strategically into the curriculum, the children will experience the child-initiated effects, while still being guided by the teacher.

The goal of this study is to uncover strategies that early childhood education experts deem useful when navigating in between teacher-directed and child-initiated practices. For this study, "guided play" will be used to refer to this middle ground between child-initiated and teacher-directed practices. By asking both teachers and researchers, this study hopes to answer

the following questions: 1) How do teachers maintain control of the classroom while simultaneously honoring the children's agency? 2) What strategies make it easier to establish guided play practices in the classroom? 3) Are there any differences between the teachers' and researchers' perspectives on how to implement guided play?

Methods

Participants

Teachers. Preschool and transitional classroom teachers were recruited from the Helen Gordon Child Development Center (HGCDC) located in Portland, Oregon to participate in this study. HGCDC follows a child-centered approach inspired by Reggio Emilia. They teach children ages 2-3 as a transitional classroom teacher or ages 3-5 as a preschool teacher, Monday through Friday. In total three teachers participated in this study, and are referred to as Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C below.

Researchers. Two graduate student researchers from Portland State University (PSU) were also recruited for this study. They research and observe primarily preschool and kindergarten classrooms and programs in the Portland area. They are labeled as Researcher A and Researcher B below.

Including the teachers, there are five total early childhood experts who participated within this study. Their participation was completely voluntary and they have all given their written informed consent.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted before any part of this study that involved the participants occurred. From there, the study was introduced to the HGCDC teachers, and later on the PSU researchers. Those interested were offered more information about the study and given the consent form. An hour time slot was then set up separately to conduct an interview with each participant. The recorded interviews either took place at HGCDC or over Zoom. They were semi-structured interviews that followed a list of predetermined questions which can be found in the Appendix. Some follow up questions were added during some interviews to allow the participant to elaborate on a particular topic.

Measures

This study used five individual interviews to collect data from each participant. The average interview duration was twenty-one minutes long. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The interviews were then coded according to a key developed from emerging themes seen between the interviews. The themes emerging from the teachers' interviews were compared to those emerging from the researchers' interviews. Those findings are highlighted in the results section.

Results

After coding each of the five early childhood education expert interviews, four main findings emerged. The four findings were strategies that could be implemented by the teachers in order to foster more guided play in their classroom. The first two were mainly identified by the teachers within this study: 1) establishing close teacher-child relationships; 2) establishing close lead teacher-assistant teacher relationships. The last two findings were identified by both the

teachers and researchers: 3) using both mental and physical planning; 4) using guided questions to teach. Together they create an environment that aims to honor the children's agency, while simultaneously still being facilitated by the classroom teachers.

1) Establish Close Teacher-Child Relationships

In the teacher interviews, the relationship between the teacher and child was a frequent topic that emerged. One teacher compared the teacher-child relationship to a partnership saying that "the children and the teacher together co-design the curriculum and the environment" (Teacher A). The goal through this co-designing was for the children to "build a lot of trust and confidence that this [classroom] is a place where they can be in charge of doing things" (Teacher A). Trust between the teacher and child was a common theme throughout all three of the teacher interviews. Building and holding the children's trust was something that all the teachers were aware of and focused on cultivating and maintaining. One teacher stated that "once that trust is established, then it's easier to communicate with them" (Teacher B). Communicating and having an open dialogue between the teacher and child is a sign of a strong teacher-child relationship. Another teacher said, "I just want to build a trusting relationship, because they're in a very vulnerable situation in our center" (Teacher C). The teacher went on the explain that the "vulnerable situation" referred to being away from home or needing help in the bathroom. Preschool children can be as young as three years old, and therefore might still need help in areas that are not traditionally school related.

The researchers were asked the same questions as the teachers. The only difference was instead of asking "have you…" they were asked "have you observed teachers…" as shown in the Appendix. Due to having a third person perspective, they talked about teacher-child relationships

differently. When talking about individualized attention, one researcher mentioned that they weren't sure "whether it's that the teacher has identified that the child needs something more in that moment, or if there's already sort of an individualized learning plan in place" (Researcher A). This idea of an "individualized learning plan" for specific children was a form of acknowledging that a teacher-child relationship had been previously established. The other researcher noted that teachers have done a good job of "creating different levels of challenge" (Researcher B). An example of this was having some kids trace their name while others were told to write out a friend's name. This alludes to the fact that the researchers notice that the teachers have an understanding of where the children are individually. Due to being on the outside, the researchers' perspective is more academically focused compared to the more interpersonal approach taken by the teachers who experience the teacher-child relationship firsthand.

2) Establish Close Lead Teacher-Assistant Teacher Relationships

The teachers in this study work with one or two other full-time teachers within their classrooms. All three teachers in this study mentioned the importance of being on the same page as their co-teacher(s). When talking about allowing extra time for the children, one teacher stated that "you have to have all the teachers also on board in order to really make that go off because as you are stretching the time for the children, you're getting tighter with the time" (Teacher A). Time management and the schedule is maintained by more than one teacher. Therefore, this teacher must check in with the other teaching staff in order for a specific time stretching technique to not intrude on the schedule. Another teacher noted the importance of being on the same page for the children's sake. In disciplinary situations this teacher wants just "one person to

jump in because oftentimes two people jumping in or trying to interrupt a game will confuse kids" (Teacher C). The teachers find it important to be on the same page as one another in order to present a united front to the children. "That's the other part is having a good connection with the people in the classroom" (Teacher B). To have that united front, a "good connection" must be build through communication. One teacher states that they use verbal communication or they are "writing notes in a little folder that we can hand back and forth" (Teacher B). Having different methods of communicating for different situations allows the teachers to always be up to date on the overall class plan. The teacher-teacher relationship and dynamic was addressed in some capacity by all three teachers despite having no interview questions specifically asking about other teaching staff. Unsurprisingly, due to the lack of questions regarding other teaching staff, the researchers simply mentioned one teacher at a time.

3) Using both Mental and Physical Planning

During unstructured activities, the teachers are observing the children in order to stay ahead of the play. In this study, this type of preparation will be classified as mental planning. "My job is to always keep my finger on the pulse of the play so that when there comes a problem I already know what's happening in the play" (Teacher A). The teacher then goes on the explain that if they are not following the play "I have to ask a lot of questions when I first start in order to be an effective supporter or scaffolder" (Teacher A). In order to be helpful, the teacher finds it useful to already know the context and actions that led up to the conflict. When asked about their role during unstructured play, another teacher explains that it acts as an "ideal spot to observe where the connections are being made" (Teacher B). Understanding who the friend groups are,

and which kids open up to others during unstructured activities is knowledge that teachers find important. All of this information is taken mentally through observation.

As the teachers notice their mental planning, the researchers make note of teacher's physical planning. When the kids participate in unstructured activities, the researchers are only able to observe the physical planning that occurs. "The teachers are either setting up another activity or cleaning up whatever the previous activity was. I've also seen some teachers just kind of walking around checking in" (Researcher B). The physical planning is "setting up another activity" or physically "checking in" with kids. The researchers observe the mental planning but categorize it as "walking around" or "there's a lot of roaming around the room" (Researcher A). The fact that teachers are actively taking note of child connections or the arch of play is difficult for researchers to observe from the outside. Instead, the researcher are able to see the importance of physical planning and how setting up the environment can set the class up for success later in the day.

4) Using Guided Questions to Teach

Both the teachers and researchers reported seeing or using guided questions to teach. One teacher explains that guided questions are needed over open ended questions "because if you say 'what do you want to do today?' They're like, 'I want to go to grandma's house'" (Teacher B). In order to frame their answers around actual choices, teachers use guided questions. Researchers have also observed that "it's not them completely instructing and it's much more question based or suggestion based" (Researcher B).

In order to give children more agency at school, teachers rely heavily on offering choices. "If you give kids that space, they learn how to advocate for themselves in those situations, but it

requires the teacher to create space for that" (Researcher B). That "space" must allow the child to think independently, while still following the expectations of the classroom. "In those times where they are not choosing what they are doing we try to really pump up the amount of other choices that they are making surrounding that so that the ONLY choice I'm making is whether to do it or not" (Teacher A). Teachers are seen building in choices wherever they can to offer that agency back in situations where the children do not get a choice.

Discussion

Teacher-child relationships were largely emphasize by the teachers in this study. All three of the teachers pointed out that they believe their relationship mattered with each child. The more developed their relationship with the children was, the easier it was to teach and communicate with them. Teachers pointed out that trust was a key factor in learning. If the children do not trust that their teachers have their best interest at heart, then they are less likely to learn and benefit from having that teacher. Trust is especially important in early childhood education because the kids are still learning the overall structure of school and are away from their parents for the whole day. Guided play is based in the teacher-child relationship. Suggestions are taken more seriously by the child when they trust and value the teacher's opinions. On the teacher's end, the more they know each child, the more individualized and useful their suggestions can be.

The lead teacher-assistant teacher relationship was also highlighted in the teacher interviews. Early childhood education programs often involve more than one full-time teacher. At HGCDC, there are at least two full-time teachers in every classroom to maintain the proper teacher-to-child ratio. One teacher is considered to be the "head teacher," while the other one or

two are “assistant teachers.” The children are not notified and therefore do not recognize this hierarchy within their teachers. Therefore, research should also not negate to examine the effects of the full-time assistant teachers. In addition, the teaching staff’s collaboration, according to the teacher interviews, has an effect on the children. The more united the teaching staff is, the clearer their message gets transmitted to the children. Guided play is difficult to maintain when the teaching staff is not all on the same page. By having a good lead-assistant teacher relationship, equipped with clear communication, the teaching staff can collaborate on suggestion based activities in the classroom.

More goes on in teaching than originally meets the eye. Mental planning is important, as well as the mental and physical planning combination. Setting up activities, while easy to observe, does not encompass everything that goes into teaching. Mental planning includes anticipating conflict before it happens, and allows the teachers to be up-to-date on the specific situation when conflict occurs. Mental planning allows the teacher to step back as the children engage in free play, while simultaneously still having the full context in case the they need to step in or direct the play in another direction. In guided play, that mental planning is important because the teacher is not the one creating the activity guidelines. The children are creating their own guidelines, so in order for a teacher to help them maintain the play they must also be informed. Physical planning, as noted by the researchers, is also important in guided play. Setting up different activities, or clearing old ones, helps maintain clarity in a classroom full of choices. The teachers are able to guide the play by setting out specific activities that can target a learning goal. Once the environment is set up, the children can freely choose which activity they want to

participate in, while still being guided to work on a specific skill through the activities currently being offered.

Guided questions are an effective way to teach while still giving the child a say in the matter. They bridge the gap between structured learning and free play. They do so by allowing the child to still have a choice, while simultaneously still engaging in the desired topic chosen by the teacher. Both the teachers and researchers found this to be an effective method. Unfortunately, not every early childhood education program follows this method, especially as the children get older and the curriculum becomes more academically focused. Implementing a more question-based curriculum in programs should be a priority in order to teach within that middle ground between child-initiated and teacher-directed practices.

Conclusion

The teacher-child and lead-assistant teacher relationships are key components when fostering guided play in an early childhood education classroom. The stronger the relationships are, the more communication and collaboration can occur in the classroom. Guided questions and mental planning help bridge the gap between free play and structured learning. Mental planning allows the teacher to step into an authority role during free play already equipped with the full context of the situation. Guided questions allow the teacher to teach while still giving the child the freedom to play within those guidelines. Finally, physical planning allows the teachers to set up an environment that allows choice while still catering to a specific topic. All these factors play a role in early childhood eduction and should be explored both separately and together as a whole.

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Appendix

The questions asked to the teachers are as follows:

1. How long have you worked as a preschool or transitional classroom teacher?
2. Can you describe a few times where you might guide a child during play?
3. How often do times like those occur in a day?
4. What do you do when the kids are playing during an unstructured activity?
5. How do you decide when to step in during a child's play to teach them a new skill?
6. Can you give some examples of those times?
7. How much of the day do the children get to decide the activity they partake in?
8. How do you honor the child's agency in situations where they don't get to pick the activity?
9. What type of planned activities do you set up with a specific teaching goal in mind?
10. Is there anything else that you want to add?

The questions asked to the researchers are as follows:

1. How long have you been researching the early childhood education system?
2. What grade level do you research?
3. What are the signs that indicate a teacher should step in during a child's play?
4. What have you observed teachers doing when the kids are playing during an unstructured activity?
5. When have you observed a teacher stepping in during a child's play, specifically, to teach them a new skill?
6. On average, how much of the day do you see the children getting to decide the activity they partake in?
7. How do teachers honor the child's agency during structured activities?
8. What teacher actions do you think make the child feel respected during activities that they didn't choose to do?
9. What type of planned activities do you see teachers setting up with a specific teaching goal in mind?
10. Do you see those planned activities being successful? And is there anything you would do differently?
11. Is there anything else that you want to add?