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The Importance of Symbolic Play as a Component of the Early Childhood Curriculum

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Abstract

Educational research has linked the quality of early childhood education programs to a reduction in special education enrollment and later academic success (Smith, 2004). High quality programs offer curriculums with academics and socialization. Russian developmental psychologist and social constructivist, Lev Vygotsky, believed culture and social interaction guide cognitive development. He, also, suggested that play stimulates the development of abstract thought (Santrock, 2006). The purpose of this literature review was to determine the importance of Symbolic play as an early childhood curriculum component for the development of cognitive and social skills.

Rubin (as cited in Umek & Musek, 2001) identified role enactment as the highest level of symbolic play. Studies revealed that while engaged in symbolic play, children learn to negotiate, self-regulate, and solve tasks. During the preschool years, children will naturally engage in symbolic play. Providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum can ensure opportunities for academic and social enhancement during pretend play. By utilizing symbolic play as a curriculum component, teachers can observe students, obtain information, diagnose potential problems, and assist them.

Introduction

The problem of educational achievement gaps among students is a national concern. Researchers, educators, policymakers, and economists diligently seek answers to the problem. One potential solution that has been identified for eliminating the gaps is high quality preschool education. Educational research has linked the quality of early childcare and education programs to a reduction in special education enrollment and later academic success. High quality programs offer curriculums with academics and socialization (Smith, 2004; Louisiana Department of Education, 2006).

Organization

Educational research has linked the quality of early childcare and education programs to a reduction in special education enrollment and to later academic success (Smith, 2004). A high quality preschool is one that provides a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Young children are provided with opportunities that allow for active engagement and participation in their environment which promote learning and development (NAEYC, 2005; Louisiana, 2005).

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist, believed play stimulates the development of abstract thought. In his sociocultural cognitive theory emphasized in his that cognitive development is directed by culture and social interaction. Vygotsky and his student Daniel Elkonin studied how play stimulates self-regulation skills in children (Santrock, 2006).

The relationship of symbolic play with each area of development during early childhood is discussed. Education implications are stated. The literature review is expanded to studies documenting role play as a quality teaching tool research through college.

Different Types of Preschools Experiences

Preschools, ordinarily, provide academic and social experiences for young children prior to admittance into primary schools. Children who have developed adequate social skills tend to adjust better when they enter school. They are better prepared for interaction and learning. Erwin & Letchford (2003) suggested that the type of preschool experience may be crucial for childhood social development.

In a study in England, three main types of preschools were examined and compared to determine how different preschool experiences may be related to a child's sociometric status in the primary school. The first type of preschool, the nursery school, provided a curriculum for learning and opportunities for the children to choose social interaction. The nursery school was considered a precursor to a primary school. The next type, the playgroup, was designed mainly for the purpose of socialization. Although the playgroup had a form of structure, the focus was the activity of play. Finally, the nursery offered childcare by experienced caregivers. Additionally, a group of children who remained at home with caregivers were rated.

The results revealed that children who attended nursery schools and playgroups had, significantly, higher scores than those who remained at home and those who attended nurseries. The guided play activities provided a better opportunity for peer contact (Erwin & Letchford 2003).

A longitudinal study was performed to determine the long-term impact of high quality preschool education. Children in a community childcare center were studied from the age of 4 years to 8 years old. Data were collected and analyzed. The findings revealed language, cognitive, and social skills development through kindergarten. For some children, the impact of the high quality preschool was evident through the second grade. The greatest affected was the children affected the greatest were those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The implication of this study was high quality preschools prepare children for school (Peisner-Feinberg, 2001).

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

Further research has shown that an important factor in determining the quality of an early childhood education program is the curriculum. The National Association for the Education of

Young Children, NAEYC (2005) recommends developmentally appropriate curriculum goals that provide experiences in four developmental areas: physical, cognitive, social and emotional. Developmentally appropriate practice is based on knowledge of the typical development of a child within an age span and the uniqueness of the child.

When considering the developmentally appropriate approach, development in one domain influences the development in another. In other words, children's mobility allows them to explore and learn about the world around them. Therefore, the physical impacts the cognitive. As their language skills develop, their social skills develop, likewise.

Symbolic Play

Upon close examination of a series of articles, one of the main themes that emerged which is associated with the four areas of cognitive, language, social/emotional, and physical development is symbolic play. Symbolic play is important for development in the four areas as well as reflections of the development. Young children not only acquire knowledge through play, but they express and represent their ideas, thoughts, and feelings when engaged in symbolic play (NAEYC, 2005).

Symbolic play, also known as pretend play, includes dramatic and sociodramatic play. This type play occurs when children learn to transform objects into other objects, then substitute them and pretend they are the real objects. This period generally appears at 18 months, peaks at 4-5 years old and then declines (Santrock, 2006, p.283).

Room arrangement and selection of appropriate play materials at different ages are important to promote developmentally appropriate symbolic play. It was also suggested that symbolic play should be an important part of the preschool curriculum

Cognitive and Language

Studies were done to determine the impact of various factors and their combinations on the development of symbolic play. The research purpose was to identify differences in the development of the children's symbolic play based on the structure of the toys and the play situation.

The research involved two studies with different three age groups of preschool children.. Variation in the structure of toys and unstructured play materials was planned. The play area was prepared with structured and play materials. Each group of children decided how and with what materials they would play.

Smilansky's Five-Level Scale of Development, Smilansky and Shefatya's Scale for Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play. When the data were analyzed the results showed that younger children needed more structured play materials. Also, children in mixed-age groups reached higher levels of symbolic play than children in same-age groups. However, regardless of age, children's play varied according to the play situation (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

The level of complexity of symbolic play was dependent upon the context of play and the play situation. Use of language and communication was revealed in different stages of symbolic play (Umek & Musek, 2001).

Another study linked high quality pretend play with cognitive competence (Leong & Bodrova, 2001). Bergen (2002) explained that there is probably a relationship between pretense and language because of their development around the same age. The symbolic play or pretense involving transforming objects and actions requires negotiations and social dialogue to interact. Further involvement in the process includes problem solving, planning, script knowledge, and self-regulation, which require cognitive skills.

Lev Vygotsky theorized that children use private speech for self-regulation and to solve task. Their speech is first external, then, it is then internalized. Eventually, a child can carry out a task without talking it out aloud. Vygotsky further indicated that children who use private speech are more socially competent than those who don't. He suggested that language development and thought develop separately, but language is necessary for the development of thought. Later researchers have begun to support Vygotsky's views (Bergen, 2002; Leong & Bodrova, 2001).

A study compared 4 and 5 year old children in a story telling situation. The children who were involved in pretend play reenacting a story used more elaborate vocabulary terms and had better narrative recall than children using storytelling only. In sociodramatic play, children tend to construct and articulate implicit rules.

In our hurried school environment, children often are not allocated sufficient time to engage in pretense play. If children lack pretense play opportunities, their metacognition, problem solving, and social skills may suffer.

In this investigation, Calderwood (1999) examined the relation of the structure and function of a song spontaneously created by a 44 month old. The author emphasized the importance of being able to use language competently. It is, too, a complex task. Variation of egocentric speech during fantasy play connects to the child's thinking.

Egocentric speech is the term Piaget used for self-talk in young children. He believed this type of speech reflected immaturity. Vygotsky argued that children use private speech, which is equivalent to egocentric speech, for self-regulation and to solve task. They self-talk to control themselves and to act. The speech is first external. it is then internalized. Eventually, a child can carry out a task without talking it out aloud. Vygotsky further indicated that children who use private speech are more socially competent than those who don't. He suggested that language development and thought develop separately, but language is necessary for the development of thought. Later researchers have begun to support Vygotsky's views.

In her struggle with her own development and to separate from her mother, Emily sang songs and played. The song included stories, movies, storybooks, and conversations that were meaningful to her. Through her songs, she worked toward solving her problems. When analyzed, the findings from this study demonstrated that during symbolic play, when egocentric speech is used, the social and linguistic development of a child could be revealed.

The information that is revealed is important to teachers, caregivers and parents. They can observe and collect data pertaining to language development, readiness for literacy or sense of self. The data can be used to facilitate and nurture the development of children (Calderwood, 1999).

Cognitive

Symbolic play and cognition were addressed in a mixed-aged environment. The purpose of the study was to compare the impacts of teacher-directed pretend play and child-directed pretend play on cognitive performance. The ultimate goal was to study different forms of organization of pretend play on children's cognitive performance in a mixed-age environment relating to children's affective behavior and teacher's directing stimuli of the playing process.

Cognitive competence in children and high-quality play, particularly pretend play, show a connection because of the requirement of pretend play to have the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically. In addition, it involves social dialog and negotiation, role-taking, script knowledge, and improvisation. Other cognitive strategies are displayed during pretense such as joint planning, negotiation, problem solving, and goal seeking. An interaction between cognition and emotions has, also, been identified (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2004, p. 268).

A recent theory called cognitive theory of pretense suggests that play involves many areas of the brain. Play is a part of language and emotions as well as cognition. In mixed-age groups, children of at least a two-year age span and diverse ability levels are grouped in a single classroom and are encouraged to share experiences involving intellectual, academic, and social skills.

The teachers facilitated the play situation. Teachers through Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD) helped children in raising their cognitive and emotional development to a higher level by intervening in the play process. ZPD involves the assistance from a more skilled individual to aid a child in achieving a task too difficult to master alone (Santrock, 2006). Data were analyzed. The results revealed a significant increase in cognitive behaviors during child-directed play in groups when compared with teacher-directed frontal management of the lesson.

The direct teaching methods used in preparing young children for school tend to take away from playtime. If children are deprived of opportunities to play, they may suffer diminishment of skills in other areas (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2004).

Social/Emotional

Symbolic play is a useful assessment tool. In the following study, the researchers observed the interactions of different groups of children in different play situations. They compared the behavior of depressed 3-6 year olds to the behavior of nondepressed clinical peers and nondepressed nonclinical peers in three play situations of solitary free play, interactive free play, and play narratives.

The children participated in three play situations. In solitary play, the child was left alone to play with the freedom to choose toys. In interactive free play, the child played with the investigator but had the freedom to choose the game or toy.

The findings, when analyzed, revealed that depressed children played significantly less than children in both nondepressed groups. This difference occurred only in symbolic play. With group and play situation and the amounts of manipulative, there were differences in symbolic play among the depressed and nondepressed children. Significant interaction effects of group and play situation occurred. The largest difference in symbolic play was in the play narrative situation. In determining if there was a difference in the number of behavior changes between the groups and play situations, depressed children showed significantly more behavioral changes than the nondepressed children in both control groups. Finally, for mood presentations, during the play narratives, depressed children displayed the largest amounts of the play behavior change in positive and negative mood presentations (Mol Lous, de Wit, De Bruyn, and Riksen-Walraven, 2002).

Emotional

Lindsey, & Colwell (2003) designed a study to extend the existing literature on emotional competence by examining the relative competence of emotion understanding and emotion regulation to preschoolers emotional competence with peers and to examine children's pretend and physical play as contributors to individual differences in emotional competence.

The head teacher assessed children's emotional competence with peers. The mothers assessed their children's adaptability. For the sociometric assessment, the children, using photographs identified the individuals they liked playing with the most. A negative nomination occurred when a child was identified with whom the participant did not like to play. The emotional understanding interview consisted of a picture and a narrative.

The findings revealed that children who engaged in higher levels of pretend play with a peer demonstrated greater emotions than children who engaged in lower levels. There was no relationship between children's physical play and emotional understanding and emotion regulation. Statistical methods employed were the t-test and regression analysis.

This study is important for understanding children's individual differences in emotional competence. It is significant to educators because this particular aspect of individual differences that must be considered (Lindsey, & Colwell, 2003).

Social

Social development in addition to cognitive and language development occurs during symbolic play. Children have conversations with an imaginary companion. This study was to test, directly, the notion that having an imaginary companion is related to acceptance by peers. It was hypothesized that children may create imaginary companions to compensate for inadequate social relationships or as an alternative to interactions with real peers.

The sociometric interview, where the child selected a favorite classmate was administered in one session. During the fantasy interview, the children were asked to identify their favorite story. Then they were asked to explain to the investigator what they like to do alone. Each response was coded, as either fantasy or reality oriented. For the imaginary companion interview, each child and their parent were questioned as to whether the child had an invisible friend or a personified object as a pretend friend. The teachers were asked for negative peer nominations.

According to this study, children do not create imaginary companions to compensate for poor relationships. Actually, children who role play and negotiate conflicts successfully with their imaginary companion could in fact be developing social skills. Teachers could perceive the imaginary companion as positive rather than negative (Gleason, 2004).

The following research investigated the possible relationship between children's social understanding and friendships in the preschool period to their accounts of friends and their friendships in their first year at school. Children's social understanding during the preschool period and in their first year at school would be positively related to their liking of their friends, and the insight they showed about their friends. Early shared pretend play and conflict free experiences were expected to relate to increased levels of liking and insight and lower levels of conflict in friendships at school.

The findings revealed links between the quality of friendships formed during preschool and school. Social understanding and communication were important factors in the development and maintenance of the friendships. "The sharing and negotiating an imaginary world in pretend play provides a potent context for talking and learning about why people behave the way they do links between inner states and human actions" (Dunn, 2002, p.632). Another link to friendship quality, although unclear, was mother's education. The children whose mothers were more educated presented a better expression of how well they liked their friends (Dunn, 2002).

Social/Cognitive

Parten (1932) classified children's play into four categories. Rubin, Maioni, & Hornung, 1976 examined the play hierarchies of social and cognitive and investigated the forms of cognitive play behaviors children engage in during solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative play. Secondly, to discover whether differences existed between the free-play behaviors of middle and lower class preschoolers.

Using combined social and cognitive play data, the results showed that lower class preschoolers exhibited significantly more solitary-functional and parallel-functional play and significantly less associative-constructive and cooperative-dramatic play when compared to their middle class peers. (Rubin, Maioni, and Hornung, 1976).

These findings are certainly important to teachers when planning lessons and setting up classrooms. Children who lack constructive and cooperative-dramatic play skills can be assisted.

Cognitive/Language/Social/Emotional

Symbolic play has been found to be instrumental in assisting children in controlling their behavior. Elias & Brek (2001) tested Vygotsky's assumption that sociodramatic play contributes to self-regulation in children. Also, the study was performed to determine if there was a difference in the link between the sociodramatic play and self-regulation of the high-impulsive and low-impulsive preschool children.

According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, self-regulation is an outcome of sociodramatic play. Psychological skills acquired socially or from the external environment, as through conversation are internalized and then acted upon. This process is evidenced during sociodramatic play.

During sociodramatic play, while children are imitating adults, they are required to follow rules and social norms. They engage in higher level tasks such as complex sociodramatic (CSD) play, which involves Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky felt that children's "ZPD contained skills and concepts that are not yet fully developed but are 'on the edge of emerging' and will emerge if the child is given proper support" (Leong, & Bodrova, 2001, p. 49). Furthermore, when a child is involved in sociodramatic play, private speech is often used.

The findings suggested that sociodramatic play improved self-regulation in high-impulsive preschoolers. Furthermore, as children self-regulate, they need less adult assistance. Additionally, it was revealed that it is through the activities planned by the preschool teacher and the communication skills that encourages and fosters CSD. Furthermore, self-regulation prepares preschoolers for the challenges of school. Sociodramatic play is important for both impulsive and non-impulsive children. However, impulsive children can obtain greater benefits because of their tendency lag behind their peers. The investigation indicated that preschool teachers can foster the development of self-regulation by allowing students to create and participate in various types of role play (Elias & Brek, 2001).

Teacher Oriented Cognitive/Language

Play is natural for children. The issue of adults' involvement in children's pretend play has been controversial. Theorists such as Freud and Dewey argued that adults should not interfere in child's play. Other theorists, such as Vygotsky, believed adults could provide support to young children to help them to reach higher levels. He based this on his concept of zone of proximal development (Korat, Bahar, and Snapir, 2002, p.386).

This investigation was carried out in a kindergarten class located at Levinski Teachers College in Tel-Aviv, Israel. A team consisting of three teachers followed Vygotsky's theory of play which attributes higher mental functions to social dialogue. They wanted to build a developmentally appropriate play-based literacy model for preschoolers that could be used by future teachers. The purpose of the study was to determine the appropriate intervention for literacy to emerge. The project lasted 6 months.

The teachers set up 3 levels of intervention. They included 2 areas of sociodramatic play. They were an easily accessible print rich environment and an area where they could get responses to questions initiated through their play. The last intervention was planning a curriculum that dealt with literacy. The children recognized and incorporated the written language into their imaginary worlds (Korat et al., 2002).

Summary

“The preschool years are often considered by experts the ‘golden age’ of symbolic/pretense play that is dramatic or sociodramatic in nature”(Santrock, 2006, p. 283). This period generally appears at 18 months, peaks at 4-5 years old and then declines. Teachers begin to plan more structured role play following the preschool years.

The results of the research revealed that symbolic play improves cognitive, social, and emotional skills in preschool students through college. The concept of development through play aligns with Vygotsky’s sociocultural cognitive theory (Leong & Bodrova, 2001). Cognitive development is directed by culture and social interactions. Increased cognition increases self-regulation. Through role play, students can increase their cognitive and social skills. They can become better problem-solvers. The teacher’s role changes from instructor to facilitator. For young children, a developmentally appropriate curriculum that includes symbolic play as a component is critical for a successful program.

Conclusion

Symbolic play, a common factor identified as impacting all developmental areas, is a resource that is available to every teacher. Teachers can prepare classrooms by making dramatic play equipment and toys accessible to the young students. Preschoolers can create a script to fit a situation. The teacher should always be available to assist the student, but children should be the leaders in play. Ultimately, since symbolic improves cognitive, social, and emotional skills, it should be implemented as a curriculum component.

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