

Play Time Should Not Be Over: The Importance of Play in Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

Abstract: A typical elementary school classroom after kindergarten consists of desks and charts. The toys and activity centers are replaced with worksheets and desk work. However, classrooms filled with more play and fewer worksheets would be more beneficial. This change is possible if more classrooms incorporated guided play. Guided play occurs when children are given the time and space to play, explore, and discover at their own discretion while adults guide them in making connections to larger concepts. Guided play is important not only in the cognitive development of children, but also in their social development. Some skills can only be learned through interaction with other children in their own time and way; however, play of almost any kind in elementary classes often halts after kindergarten. Unfortunately, many teachers face instructional time and curriculum standard constraints which prevent incorporating guided play into their classrooms on a daily basis. I research the reasons why guided play is removed from classrooms beyond kindergarten, investigated past and current models of play, and considered how guided play has affected child social and cognitive development. I then propose specific ways guided play could effectively be incorporated into classrooms.

Key words: guided play, play in schools, children's development, elementary school

I went to school in Dalton, a small town in northwest Georgia. My elementary career was spent at Brookwood school just a few miles down the road. In kindergarten, I vividly remember learning stations with shaving cream, blocks, and puppets. It felt like we got to play all day, every day, but that all changed the next year. I was so confused and upset on my first day of first grade when I discovered my classroom had no toys. The closest thing to a toy were little clear containers filled with small figurines and miniature furniture. Each day I entered my classroom with hope my classmates and I would play with the objects inside the containers; we never did. I learned my first grade year all the toys were left behind in my kindergarten classroom down the hall, never to return through the remainder of my elementary career.

My experience in first grade is much like the experience of elementary school students throughout America. After kindergarten, toys and playtime are replaced with independent worksheets and silence. However, children need periods of time to play and explore as they wish. This is often called “free play,” which is an important aspect in child development. Free play is important for all elementary age children, although it may not be the best way of learning for older students. A related, but more structured form of play is called “guided play.” Children decide how they want to play and discover as teachers watch and guide them with questions or prompts as necessary. This allows for children to experience freedom of choice and control over their own learning while teachers guide them towards curriculum standards. Unfortunately, play — just like my toys beginning in first grade — disappears from many elementary classrooms because of time constraints and the pressure for students to perform well on mandated standardized tests. The pursuit of academic achievement overwhelms the critical importance of allowing children to be children. By removing playtime and toys from the classroom, young students are expected to mature quickly and learn in ways that are not developmentally friendly.

Some skills, such as social and self-regulatory skills, cannot be learned from a worksheet. Students as young as 6 years old are expected to sit at their desks and listen attentively to the teacher and complete academic work during a six-hour instructional day. Young children can be guided into higher academic thought by incorporating time for play into elementary classrooms which encourages students' social and cognitive skill development.

Current elementary school curriculum is carefully scheduled day by day, but play time is often not included in this careful scheduling. According to Fisher et. al (2011), many primary grade classrooms have “replaced playful experiences with scripted curricula” (qtd. in Nathan & Pellegrini, p. 342) which means school days are scheduled almost to the minute. This does not provide the opportunity for curiosity for the student or the teacher. Children are discouraged from asking questions in this environment as time is limited for teachers to answer and expound on their questions. By dictating precisely how each school day should go, spontaneity and zest for discovery is lost. As described by Yu et. al., “... learning is a continuous process” not something that should be predetermined and confined to worksheets, schedules, lesson plans or standards (Yu et. al, p. 1). Learning is often a spontaneous process. When children are given the freedom to choose what they play with and how they play, they begin to build on what they are given. They take the materials or space which are provided and build different worlds. Children can use toilet paper tubes and pipe cleaners to create telescopes, boats or popsicles. If given the chance, children can build, expand and discover using their imaginations. This takes time that they are not currently offered. Creativity cannot come within time or curriculum standard constraints, instead creativity develops through spontaneous learning opportunities.

The common highly structured classroom is a result of increased expectations of teachers and students. Research by Miller and Almon (2009) shows students are spending more time on

test preparation (three to four hours) than play (less than 30 minutes), even in kindergarten classrooms (Miller and Almon, p. 18). Instead of teachers instructing young students on the alphabet and how to write their name, they are often expected to know these things before entering kindergarten. Miller and Almon state their research found “kindergartners are now under intense pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards... reserved for first or second grade” (Miller and Almon, p. 21). Schools are increasing the volume and complexity of information given to students and moving standards down to lower grades where students are not developmentally ready in an attempt to increase learning. Young students are spending more time preparing for tests than engaging in play of any kind (Miller and Almon, p. 21). These practices are in place in an attempt to prepare students better, but instead more test preparation and less play are harming students in the long run because students are not engaged with what they are learning and gains are often lost quickly (Miller and Almon, p. 20). While highly structured and direct teaching methods are common within schools in America, it is harmful for students because it promotes shallow understanding to pass tests rather than deeper more persistent knowledge.

Many schools use the direct instruction approach to teaching students because of curriculum standards. The standards are required to be met by the end of the year in whatever way it takes to do so. Teachers often focus solely on teaching the standards so students will know them for exams, rather than teaching students in a way which will allow them to truly understand the material. This style of teaching is goal-oriented rather than knowledge-oriented (Nathan & Pellegrini, p. 342). Kagan and Lowenstein (2004) refer to the direct instruction method as “emphasizing short-term cognitive gains” (Nathan & Pellegrini, p. 342). The way classrooms and teaching methods are currently set up are not conducive to long-term cognitive gains or

understanding; rather, standards and direct instruction are conducive of learning for exams.

Reynold and Jones (1997) explain:

direct teaching and rote learning in early childhood fail to ensure lasting school success, even when they produce temporary test results, because they provide an inadequate base for higher order thinking skills that are needed in later schooling and in adult life.

(Broadhead and Burt, p. 21)

Students are unable to apply the material to real life because there is a lack of hands on interaction. Persistent learning is more likely when play accompanies instruction.

Guided play can introduce and expound on standards and curriculum within classrooms. It allows for discovery in math and science, literacy and language, and social skills. Math and science topics can be introduced through guided play in ways that are developmentally appropriate to elementary age children. Elkind (2007) says by introducing math and science-related objects to a classroom with which students may interact, students are given the opportunity to begin learning “abstract mathematical and scientific concepts they can use throughout their lives” (Riley & Jones, p. 4). Children learn basic math and science during their elementary years through opportunities to play and discover (Nathan & Pellegrini, p. 346). Teachers can then use that discovery to extend learning.

Research suggests the optimal way to incorporate math and science concepts to young children is through guided play. In Fisher et. al (2011) and in Hassinger-Das, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff article (2017) the authors cite a study of preschoolers and their ability to learn shapes. The children were separated into three groups and taught geometric shapes using three methods of instruction: guided play (the students were given shapes and then were guided by teachers

who asked questions as they played), direct instruction (teachers told students about shapes), and free play (children could interact with shapes in whatever way they chose with no instruction). After the study was completed, the researchers concluded that the children in the guided play group learned complex shapes better than those in the other groups which “suggest discovery through engagement and teacher commentary ... are key elements” in early childhood learning (Nathan & Pellegrini, p. 345; Hassinger-Das et al, p. 48). Children need to be allowed to interact with materials and what their learning and they also need the support from their teacher.

Guided play can be implemented into classrooms by setting out age-appropriate materials for students to explore. For kindergarten and first grade this might include setting out two-dimensional shapes and allowing them to play and inquire about the shapes. The teacher could then answer any questions they have. To help advance this kind of play further with older kids, the teacher could introduce more complex shapes and explain the difference between two-dimensional shapes and three-dimensional shapes. This could lead to the children replicating the shapes by drawing, building or combining shapes to make pictures. As the children use the shapes in this way, the teacher would follow the children’s conversation and help guide their connections. Guided play can be incorporated with upper elementary students by giving them objects to make simple machines, and they could experiment with how the interaction of different shapes can help or hinder the desired result. Math can also be incorporated into play using technology like ipads. Many apps intertwine learning and fun. By allowing students time to use ipads, they can incorporate learning math basics with technology. Activities like counting apples on a tree or the cookies a friend has may feel like play time to the kids, but they will also learn. It is important that technology is safely incorporated into classrooms because technology is becoming increasingly important in our world. Science could also be incorporated with guided

play by having water buckets with different objects for the students to put in the bucket. This could lead to conversations about buoyancy, density, displacement, or water purification, conservation or even the different means of transportation which utilize water. The teacher could also supply natural objects such as leaves and acorns which could lead to discussion about growth processes and change. The possibilities for student-led learning within guided play are endless.

Guided play immerses children in language. Much like the best way to learn a foreign language is to be surrounded by and immersed in it, the best way for children to learn and develop language skills is through hearing, seeing, and speaking. Riley and Jones (2010) state “[...] primary-age children need time to hear new vocabulary and experiment with the language in order to build their understanding of the ways language works” (p. 4). With the guidance of teachers on how to use words correctly and to introduce new words and ways to speak, children can begin to better understand the language because it has been modeled correctly for them through guidance and they have had the opportunity to engage with it themselves in play.

Opportunities for language development can be introduced through guided play by having many different types of books available to students. Even when children are very young, books are important because, while they may not be able to read the exact words yet, sometimes they can recite the story if they have heard it many times. This mimicry leads to connections between what they have heard and the words on the page. They also will make up their own story from the pictures they see. Teachers can guide the student’s learning and discovery while giving corrections so they learn properly. Older students continue to learn language this way by having a range of books in difficulty, theme and genre. Their vocabulary and critical thinking skills increase as they continue to figure out what new words mean.

Language development also can be incorporated through technology. Cooper (2005) states in her article technology can “help young readers attach sounds to letters, syllables, and words (Cooper, p. 292). Students can listen to audiobooks and follow along with the book. Teachers are unable to guide each student independently through reading individual books due to time, but technology provides the means for each student to read at their own level and pace while receiving assistance. While technology does not replace the teacher, it can guide the students when teachers are unable to provide guidance, and it can help manage potential chaos which can occur when children play. There are also apps which allow students to trace letters and learn their sounds. This is great for students who are not yet able to hold a pencil, but they can begin writing and learning letters. Manipulating touch screens also aids in fine motor development in hands which can prepare students for writing and holding pencils when used in conjunction with other practices like coloring. While these methods may not be considered typical play, the experience of experimentation and trial and error with correction does fall within the broader understanding of play.

Play allows children to behave as children and develop socially. In directed instruction techniques, students are expected to sit quietly and listen as the teacher speaks. This method teaches respect for the teacher and, perhaps, how to listen. Many more equally valuable social skills are possible to learn when students are given the opportunity. When students are “constantly told what to do and how to do it, they miss opportunities” to make their own decisions and see the outcomes of those decisions (Riley and Jones, p. 3). When students have the opportunity to choose what they do and how they play, they begin to relax; this allows for greater growth as they feel more comfortable in their surroundings. Being comfortable in the classroom allows for more exploration and greater discoveries. Discovery does not occur fully

while sitting at a desk working in silence, instead it requires interaction (Riley & Jones, p. 4).

Interaction with peers and teachers within the classroom provides for real-life social encounters and conversations.

Dramatic play is an excellent way to include guided play in classrooms. Playing in the classroom allows children to learn and experience social expectations and social skill practice through activities such as role play (Riley and Jones, p. 4). Children mimic what they see in adults. This means they will often act out domestic scenes where they pretend to cook or take care of babies, or they may act out the job a parent has such as mechanic or doctor. It is important children have opportunities to play and act out diverse roles so they may gain experience and understanding of the world. Teachers can set out dramatic play materials that are both themed (such as ballerina, doctor or chef costumes) or non-themed (fabric, streamers, sticks, hats, cones) so that students may choose how they use the materials.

Dramatic and role play also introduces social skills such as “cooperating, taking turns, sharing, listening ...” because children are in situations where they must interact with their peers and where resources and space are limited (Riley and Jones, p. 4). Development of social skills like these are not only important for elementary school, but for the rest of life as well. It is important that children learn and put cooperation and listening into practice while they are young so they may build on them throughout their lives. Studies indicate well-developed social skills in “children at a young age is predictive of positive relationships and achievements later on in life” (Nathan and Pellegrini, p. 350). The opportunity for and guidance through social interactions is imperative for future success. These opportunities also allow children’s minds and thoughts to grow and they develop a sense of self. Fisher et al. state “theorists suggest that social play is a key factor in developing a sense of self-awareness and theory-of-the-mind” because children

begin to see what activities they like to take part in, who they like to play with, and how other children like to play (qtd. in Nathan and Pellegrini, p. 349). It is important for young students to develop self-awareness because it is a skill necessary for the rest of life. Guided play gives children the opportunity to be in charge of how they learn.

Through play, children also begin to see not everyone is like them. The introduction of differing personalities and perspectives can potentially bring conflict. Broadhead and Burt (2012) state teachers are responsible to their students to create an environment that is similar to the real world so that the students may experience social encounters such as conflict and then have a safe space to work through it with the guidance of their teachers (p. 119). Many teachers and schools try to limit the amount of risk and conflict within their classrooms. By not allowing risk and conflict, schools are creating a false sense of utopia that does not exist beyond the classroom. Encountering risk is an important part of maturing and develops problem-solving skills (Broadhead & Burt, p. 108). Allowing confrontation within guided play environments allows children the opportunity to learn how to handle conflict in a safe, controlled environment. The teacher can guide students through the process of conflict resolution which can help students come to understand concepts such as taking other people's perspective into consideration, sharing, cooperation, and negotiation (Nathan & Pellegrini, p. 349, 350). Allowing children to play in the classroom introduces natural interactions which encourage development of social skills.

Incorporating guided play into the classroom is not the simplest thing to do. Many curricula push for more instruction time and less play time. Elementary classrooms are becoming increasingly structured each year with hardly any time for young students to take a proverbial breath. However, the way classes are set up are not conducive for optimal learning. By removing

breaks for play or recess and replacing this time with increased periods of instruction time, young students are not as focused. Alicia Cooper Stapp and Jenny Kate Karr researched the effect of recess on fifth grade students' time on-task. Their research is relevant not only to recess, but also to a broader sense of breaks and time for play. Stapp and Karr (2018) note contradictory research regarding condensed periods of instructional time:

The Pennsylvania State Education Association's (PSEA) 20/20 vision for the future (2010), authors note that increasing instructional time is critical to improving student achievement. However, critics argue that a change in instructional time does not have a significant impact on student's achievement and can be a catalyst for behavior problems. (p. 1)

This contradictory research propelled their own study. Stapp and Karr's study observed 12 students in a Mississippi classroom before and after recess to determine if recess affected the length of time students are on-task. The study concluded that "100 percent of the students displayed an increase in the amount of time they were on task" from before recess to after recess (Stapp & Karr 2018, p. 451-452). Every student was more attentive after the 25-minute recess. This study supports the need for more time for play in schools because it allows students time to decompress and socialize with peers. A school in Shanghai gives students 40 percent of the school day as play time, and its students are some of the highest-achieving students in the world (Stapp & Karr 2018, p. 449). Even though their instruction time is much lower than instruction time in American schools, they are higher achievers because the students focus more intently while in the classroom.

Incorporating guided play into classrooms can prove difficult for teachers because it requires different preparation methods than typical lesson plans. Instead of anticipating and writing lessons months in advance, preparation for guided play is much more open and dynamic. Lesson plans will become lesson guides. Guided play can be introduced to classrooms in a series of steps. The simplest way to introduce guided play is through stations in which students are given choice over what and how they play and the teacher guides them within the station. The next step would be to incorporate guided play time into the day in which students are given the opportunity to choose what they play with anywhere within the space and then the teacher guides them from there. The last step would be to incorporate play into the every day school day in which students lead what is learned and the teachers take what the students decide to play with and use it to guide them toward the curriculum standards. The teachers are there as a guide to observe their students as they play and assist as needed. Rogoff et al. (1993) describes guided play as, "...bridging to make connections between the known and the new" for students within the classroom (King & Howard 2016, p. 5). Children are constantly learning and discovering and guided play allows teachers to help make connections with their students as they discover rather than force discovery upon them.

Teachers can incorporate guided play into their classrooms in a variety of ways. Play could be introduced in stations where students have the opportunity to play with themed areas, such as a reading area. This allows children the freedom of choice in what books they choose or even how many they go through. A teacher can then guide the students if they ask what words mean or for help in identifying the main idea of a story. In this scenario, the teacher provides the space and theme for the students to be in, but the students have freedom action within the space. Guided play can also be introduced into classrooms through breaks and recess as well. Teachers

can become involved in breaks and recess to help reinforce what students have been learning. Children often take themes from what they have been learning and incorporate it into their play. Teachers can then step in, if needed, and guide them through the themes they have been learning.

Incorporating guided play often requires teachers to rethink how they manage their classrooms. Many teachers believe silence is the best way to teach because then they can easily be heard and can teach, but guided play can often seem loud and chaotic. This means teachers may need to introduce different ways to manage guided play. This could mean giving students levels of noise level they are allowed to reach such as silent, inside voices and outside voices. The teacher can communicate to the class what level is acceptable for the current activity. This teaches students how to regulate themselves, and it also teaches respect between students and between the students and teachers.

Toys and playtime may have been removed from my elementary experience after kindergarten, but that does not mean they should be removed from classrooms today. Rather, children need time to play to develop both cognitive and social skills that will be foundational building blocks for the rest of their lives. Schools have increased curriculum standards and the length of instructional time in hopes of producing greater learning, which has, in fact, hindered deeper academic understanding and social development in students. As the proverb says, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Research strongly supports the intentional inclusion of play within the school day to foster deep, persistent learning. Guided play should be incorporated in classrooms to allow children the time to be children, but also learn in developmentally appropriate ways. Play is serious work; not a distraction from learning.

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