

Effectiveness of play based learning on thinking skills



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The effectiveness of play-based learning in developing thinking skills in young children.

There is wide-held support for the thesis that a play-based curriculum will directly enhance cognition in young children. The effectiveness of play-based learning is founded on the pedagogical applications of the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky. Both theorists wrote about the importance of play in the world of children and recent research in the area builds upon their ideas to confirm that play has a significant role in the development of cognitive skills in young children.

In this essay, I will explore how play-based learning is linked to the development of thinking skills in young children, especially when the processes involved in play are made *explicit*, so that children, while enjoying the experience of play also explicitly recognise the mechanics of play, understand the role of play in their learning and anticipate the outcomes that will be achieved. I will consider both theoretical and practical levels and conclude that the benefits of play are so vital that children need to be given an abundance of opportunities to experience learning through play, because play directly affects their capacity for cognition, metacognition and problem solving, skills which are fundamental to their longer-term academic and social achievements.

In a detailed synthesis of the recent research on the relationship between play and cognition, Bergen (2002) lists how such studies link play to young children's mathematical reasoning, cognitive strategies, linguistic ability, problem-solving skills and mental representation ability. However, despite

the positive literature on the importance of play in the learning experiences of children, there still exists an underlying bias – both parental and pedagogical – that sees play as a “ trivial,” “ purposeless” and “ aimless” activity or a “ jumbo category” that includes all sorts of activities, some of which are “ conducive to learning” and others which are not (Wood and Attfield, 2005, p. 2). It is pertinent then to ask the same question that Moyles (2005, p. 2) asks: “ Can play be equated with anything that is 'worthwhile' in the twenty-first-century world?”

A play-based curriculum includes play as a pedagogical tool. This is based on the understanding that the characteristics of play are always present in the world of the child (Piaget, 1999) and it is through play that children naturally learn about the world. Play involves a wide variety of activities and behaviours that take place in different meaningful contexts. Adults, however, according to Piaget (1999), tend to distinguish between “ serious endeavour” and “ play” and see a child's play as a “ world of irresponsibility, in which unreality reigns supreme” (p. 366). The very nature of play might indeed be founded on behaviour that is seemingly spontaneous and idiosyncratic, but these characteristics are often mirrored in young children's thinking patterns. Wood and Attfield (2005, p. 87) clarify that while young children's thinking exhibits elements of disorganisation and inconsistency, there are actually very consistent patterns being developed in play which later integrate into a child's accumulated body of knowledge and experience. This occurs successfully when children are encouraged to become consciously aware of the processes at play in their play-based learning activities. It is when play is made explicit – that is, when it is understood at the

metacognitive level – that it becomes an especially effective tool in developing thinking skills in young children (p. 87).

Thinking skills are a group of skills that govern how new knowledge is learned. Clarke (2008, p. 1) defines thinking as a “ complex process that involves a variety of skills that are often used together when confronted with a new and interesting situation.” Thinking skills also require “ knowing about thinking.” This is metacognition. Metacognitive abilities include planning how to approach a learning task or problem, evaluating a specific learning process or approach to problem-solving, and being motivated to do this (Clarke, 2008). The development of thinking skills in young children requires that children be given opportunities to think “ for themselves” and apply the knowledge they have acquired in one learning situation to another situation. Thinking skills are also often called “ critical thinking” or “ creative thinking” because of the assumed ability of a learner to reason, evaluate, solve and process, while being aware of executing these skills.

Clarke (2008) stresses that children need opportunities for questioning and answering in a “ variety of contexts” and “ play situations.” In these situations, adults should serve as guides to model the skills required for developing cognition and metacognition. Children develop thinking skills through their interactions with adults as well as with other children and through “ their explorations and use of mind-engaging materials” (Puckett and Diffily, 2004, p. 36).

Play is effective in developing thinking skills because different play situations offer cognitive challenges, provide opportunities for young children to form

new connections between ideas and concepts, and consolidate cognitive competence by incorporating “ practice, rehearsal, repetition, mastery and extension” (Wood and Attfield, 2005, p. 88).

Moreover, cognitive development in young children is linked to their ability to acquire the skills that Vygotsky called “ symbolic representation” (Whitebread and Jameson, 2005, p. 65), which are linked to abstract thought, the type of cognitive competence developed in later years. Young children between the ages of two and seven are in, what Piaget calls, the “ pre-operational” period of cognitive development, a period characterised by the “ acquisition of representational skills: mental imagery, language, and drawing” (Puckett and Diffily, 2004, p. 105). During this phase in their cognitive development, children use words, concepts, images, signs and symbols.

A play-based curriculum can effectively foster the acquisition of such skills. Even a game of tag can offer opportunities for the development of thinking skills (Little, 1998) if the teacher makes explicit the mechanics of the game. For example, the physical education activity of “ chasing and tagging” becomes an opportunity for thinking as well as “ having fun.” Thinking skills are developed when students discuss the rules and objectives of the game with the teacher in the guiding role. For example, the teacher might ask about the strategies students used in tagging, seek ideas on how it is best to play the game, question how well students understood directions, and encourage students to consider novel ways for playing the game.

Similarly, playing with play dough in the classroom can become an opportunity for developing thinking skills (Dimech and Pace, 2005) when the teacher introduces the concept and symbol of CAF (Consider All Facts.) Students are offered the opportunity to develop thinking skills when asked leading questions by the teacher, for example, “ Where are we going to play?” “ What should we do so as not to dirty the tables?” and “ What should we do when we have finished playing?” (p. 5). Hereford and Schall (1998) also consider how guiding children through “ dramatic play” can help develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, playing a “ trip to the moon” could begin with guided questions that identify a problem (the need for helmets), brainstorm solutions (what can be used) and choose and evaluate a solution. Here the teacher supports the choices of the students even when impractical or illogical (p. 22). These activities encourage students to think for themselves and to understand the mechanics of their playing and thinking activities at a metacognitive level.

In both theory and practice then, the evidence supporting a direct link between the effectiveness of play-based learning in developing thinking skills in young children is significant. The development of thinking skills thrives best when young children experience learning in a variety of complex contexts. A play-based curriculum offers the ideal multidimensional context in which young children are able to develop cognitive competence and metacognitive strategies. Young children should therefore be given ample opportunities to experience play, because play can *indeed* be equated with something “ worthwhile.”

References

Bergen, B., 2002. The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development. [online] In *Early Childhood Research & Practice* , Vol. 4 No. 1. Available from: <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html>

[Accessed: 21 November 2008].

Clarke, J., 2008. *What are 'thinking skills', and how can they be nurtured in young children?* [online] In Teaching Expertise. Available from: <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/fostering-young-childrens-thinking-skills-3193>

[Accessed: 21 November 2008].

Dimech, N., and Pace, D., 2005. Thinking Skills Lesson Plans for Kindergarten [online] *Skola* , Available from: <http://schoolnet.gov.mt/tsearly/LESSONPLANS/lessonplansforkindergarten.PDF>

[Accessed: 21 November 2008].

Hereford, N. J., and Schall, J., 1998. *Learning Through Play: A Practical Guide for Teaching Young Children* . New York, NY: Teaching Resources/Scholastic.

Little, N., 1998. Sharks and Barracudas: Chasing and Tagging Activity: An Educator's Reference Desk Lesson Plan [online] *The Educator's Reference Desk* . Available from: http://eduref.org/Virtual/Lessons/Physical_Education/Games/GAM0005.html

[Accessed: 21 November 2008].

<https://assignbuster.com/effectiveness-of-play-based-learning-on-thinking-skills/>

Moyles, J. R., ed., 2005. *Excellence of Play* . Berkshire: Open University Press.

Piaget, J., and Inhelder, B., 1999a. *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence: : Classification and Seriation* . London: Routledge.

Puckett, M. B., and Diffily, D., 2004. *Teaching Young Children* . Clifton Park, NY: Cengage Learning.

Whitebread, D., and Jameson, H., Play, Storytelling and Creative Writing, p. 59-71. In Moyles, J. R., ed., 2005. *Excellence of Play* . Berkshire: Open University Press.

Wood, E., and Attfield, J., 2005. *Play, Learning and the Early Childhood Curriculum* . California: SAGE Publications Inc.

5/ 5