

Does play-based kindergarten help children academically? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

When the kids in a kindergarten class that OISE professor Angela Pyle was observing recently decided to set up a bank, she paid close attention. The idea came from a combination of things: The teacher had been teaching the group directly about money, and the mother of one of the students had recently started working at a bank. After some discussion with the teacher, the kids launched "The Money Bank." The teacher asked the children what resources they needed and, after providing them, stepped away.

"The children started making signs," says Pyle. "They posted the hours of operation. They made name tags. One of the kids made a chart listing the different coins and their value for kids who didn't know."

Pyle, an assistant professor in OISE's Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, calls this an "amazing example" of academic learning through play. She's working to make it easier for teachers to create more of these moments.

"I'm interested in the balance between developmentally-appropriate practices like play-based learning and the academic learning that we're expecting from young children," she says, and she has launched a large-scale research study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to investigate this interface.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Ontario, like many other jurisdictions worldwide, went through a phase where it emphasized the importance of academic learning among young children-and not without reason.

"We have a lot of research that shows the importance for really young children of having some direct instruction," says Pyle. Learning how to put sounds together to make words, for example, is best taught this way.

But in 2010, Ontario changed its approach to kindergarten, introducing a new play-based model that sees children learning not only through traditional instruction, but through play. The idea is that play helps children learn in a more integrated way, supporting their cognitive, social, physical and emotional development.

And indeed, research shows there are lots of social and emotional benefits to play. "Play-based learning is one of the best promoters of self-regulation in young children," Pyle says. "We know how important for it is for us to be able to regulate our emotions and our actions in classroom environments-and in work environments later on in life."

But the key point, she says, is that while the province mandated play-based learning, it didn't change any of the academic expectations teachers are responsible for

In that sense, teachers are in a bind: we know that play is good for things like self-regulation, but best practices here suggest that this kind of play works best when teachers leave students to their own devices, so they can learn to compromise and negotiate.

But on the other hand, for play to work for academic learning, teachers may have to be more involved in guiding it.

Along with a team of grad students, Pyle has been observing kindergarten classrooms with an eye to better understanding the relationship between play and literacy. She is videotaping the normal unfolding of the day as well as interviewing teachers to gain a sense of their "play profiles"-that is, the teacher's beliefs about the role of play. For example, some teachers believe that play has inherent educational value. Others see it as important socially and emotionally but not academically. Some think it's only useful as a break in the day, for blowing off steam.

She also interviews children, because, she says, "We believe that information about the classroom comes from all members of the classroom." She shows small groups of children photos from their classroom and has them create a story about what's going on as a way to get a sense of how they perceive their own learning.

Pyle hopes her research will help clarify the relationship between play and academic learning and lead to guidelines for teachers and teacher trainees who are trying to balance sometimes-conflicting mandates.

She knows firsthand the need for proper supports for teachers, having spent seven years as a classroom teacher herself, the last several in kindergarten.

The chance to do classroom-based research, she says, "helps fulfill the need in me to have children's voices in my life.

"There's a noise in classrooms that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. I really love that noise."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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