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The power of play : why educators must rethink early childhood education

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The Power of Play:
Why Educators Must Rethink Early Childhood Education

Krysta Bradley
LS400, Section 01
Dr. Scott Waltz
December 17, 2010

For Mikey & Tyler:

Thank you for reminding me what it is like to play

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Why I Chose this Project

As of now, preschool, in the United States is optional. Some parents are fortunate enough to send their child to a high-quality preschool, some keep their children home until Kindergarten, and some families use government-funded programs such as Head Start. This current system is problematic because it is not the children in government-funded programs that are receiving the so-called 'head start'. Because the initiative for Universal Preschool was defeated by California voters in 2006, the next step is figuring out how best to improve the system currently in place. As I begin this project, my goal is to find out what sort of preschool would benefit all children, regardless of race, class, or socio-economic status.

My initial motivation which drew me to this project came from an experience I had with service learning last summer. In the summer of 2009, I worked at a school, assisting a teacher with the Summer Bridge Program. This program is an intervention designed to help children who are not quite ready for Kindergarten. They were, however, scheduled to begin Kindergarten in the Fall. It turned out many of these children had not had access to preschool and therefore had no experience in a school setting. Through a play-based curriculum, I witnessed these students blossom in the four weeks I had to work with them. Most of them, if not all, became more social and interactive with each other, the teacher, and me.

My second and more personal motivator came from an experience I had with my son, Mikey. He is three years old and began preschool in August. We were all very excited for him to make friends and have a fun pre-K experience. As it turned out, the program he was in was very rigorous. He and his classmates worked in 'centers' for the majority of class time. He also began bringing home homework. What's more is that he didn't like it there. He dreaded going and claimed to have not made any friends. This was not the experience I had imagined for him at all. After much discussion, my husband and I decided to pull him from the program. All I want for him is to be able to be a child, have fun, and make friends. This can be achieved by simply letting him *play*.

L.S. Vygotsky's research suggests that higher mental functioning can be accomplished through social interaction, play, and the action of *doing*. Additionally, Vivian Paley's research found that a child can succeed in an academic and social context through fantasy or socio-dramatic play. As a mother, a future-educator, a community member and an advocate for social equality, I have decided to work with Pre-K teachers to better implement play into their classroom. After speaking with one of my own instructors and studying some of the works of Vivian Gussin Paley and L.S. Vygotsky, I have concluded that the best way to approach such a task is through a *play*-based curriculum.

Krysta Bradley

Abstract

As The United States attempts to compete with high-performing countries like China, the need to make children ‘kindergarten-ready’ increases. As the preschool curricula become increasingly academic-based, children are losing much needed time for play and socializing. Furthermore, many preschool teachers feel pressure from parents and the rest of society to create a curriculum that is more academic. But educators must take a step back and look at how this shift is affecting the children. Children *need* play; it is crucial to their development. For centuries, children have learned through play. Play promotes moral, perceptual, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

A Review of the Literature

The children of this country are the future. There is no doubt the majority of educators and policymakers desire what is best for American youth. A report from The National Institute for Early Education Research (2010) concluded that high quality care in early childhood can reduce crime rates, increase literacy, and provide better academic success for students. But what determines high quality care? While some children might benefit from an academic-based curriculum, most 4-year-olds are not biologically ready to sit down at a desk and complete worksheets. However, all children, across all cultures and economic backgrounds, can benefit from a play-based curriculum. Through play, Vivian Gussin Paley asserts, a child invents his or her own reading, writing and arithmetic concepts in a more primitive form.

Hanline (1999) asserted there are three basic types of play: construction, symbolic, and sensorimotor. Construction play ranges from playing with water, sand or other fluid material to block building. Any type of art activity would also qualify as constructive play. Symbolic play is the act of taking on a role of a different person. Finally, sensorimotor play deals with fine and gross motor skills (Hanline, 1999). Paley's work addresses all three types of play, with an emphasis on symbolic play, or 'fantasy play'. Fantasy play, role-playing, and story-telling increase a child's social, psychological, and mental processes (Paley, 2004).

Paley also points out that during fantasy play, boys and girls find ways to identify with who they are, in terms of both gender and culture (Paley, 1984). She argues that children come into the preschool with a certain set of knowledge. They also bring with them a set of fears, concerns, and curiosity about the unknown. Through fantasy play, children address their fears by

acting them out and by working together; they learn more about what they are afraid of. This act is more powerful than anything an adult could say to try to soothe a young child (Paley, 1988). Children also learn about reality, or real-world situations, through fantasy play. Paley (1986) makes this argument while discussing a 3-year-old girl named Mollie. "...as she learns to pretend that school is something else, it begins to make sense. The fantasies form a common thread connecting people and ideas, materials and phrases, private thoughts and public events. Her pathway to reality leads through the doll corner, the building blocks, the story table." (p. xv). In addition, Paley believe that children play and create stories (through fantasy play) in order to figure out their niche in society. They create characters and situations to display individuality while, at the same time, building community (Paley, 2010).

Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky knew undoubtedly how play affects a child's development (Vygotsky, 1978). By simply playing with ideas, a child develops abstract thinking and has the power to turn a concrete object into something that is symbolic. Vygotsky also believed that during play, a child is far more mature than in other situations. Vygotsky wrote, "In play, a child is above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Davidson, 2006).

Teachers can use play to their benefit as well. By observing children while they play an instructor can better understand his or her students culturally, intellectually, and socially. This, in turn, will better equip the teacher to make the learning environment a fun and interesting place for children of all backgrounds (Paley, 2000). Teachers should always observe children during play and, if he or she sees an opportunity to help the children make connections, she can ask

open-ended questions. Paley believes that by listening to children and asking questions, we are showing the child we care and that we respect them (Paley, 2007).

Universal preschool is a fundamentally good idea; all children should have equal access to preschool. Equal access should also be described as equal distribution: every child, no matter their race or socio-economic status will benefit most from a play-based program. Therefore, early childhood educators and policy makers must rethink how we develop the preschool curriculum. I truly believe in recent years, we have begun sacrificing the joy of childhood in order to make the nation's children 'kindergarten-ready'. Peter Campbell (Pelo, 2008) calls this term an oxymoron. "When", he ponders, "are children ever allowed to be beginners?" (p. 59). In this so-called 'race to the top' and America's need to compete with other countries, we are losing sight of what is most important: what is best for the children. Children deserve to play, they deserve to spend time with their friends, and they deserve to simply be children. Through the literature, I have learned what it can mean for a child to play, how it can enhance development, and why early childhood educators should utilize a play-based curriculum.

Community Partnership with The Mexican American Opportunity Foundation

As I began researching my topic, "The Power of Play in Preschools", I knew I wanted to connect with someone in my own community. I met with a woman named Elia Aguilar, who is the staff development director at the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF). The MAOF provides many services to Latino families such as, child care, preschool, a food bank, adult education, senior services, and youth programs. The program offers eight centers for

childcare and preschool services. Elia supervises the teachers at each of these centers.

I initially met with Elia to discuss the curriculum being used by MAOF instructors. My goal was to talk with her about what it is that works for the program and what, if anything, could use improvement. She believes the program works because it is interactive and the learning is hands-on. After we discussed the curriculum, I filled Elia in on what I have been researching, which is “The Power of Play”. She confided she has a very hard time convincing her staff that children learn a great deal from play. She went on to say many of the teachers within the program don’t feel as though they are being good teachers if they are not doing something *academic* in the classroom. It was at this point, I knew I had I found my community partner.

Elia and I decided it would be favorable for me to make brochures for the teachers informing them about the benefits of play and why it should be a part of the preschool curriculum. Elia also asked me if I would be interested in giving a presentation, or a series of presentations, to the teachers at a staff development meeting. Excitedly, I agreed and we are proceeding from there.

The goal of our project is to inform the staff at MAOF of the incredible benefits of play. Like me, Elia believes in the power of play and how children learn from simply doing what comes naturally. Her objective is to convince her staff of this as well. By convincing these teachers of what I have learned through my research, I will be helping them engage young children from all over our community. Additionally, I hope to use the feedback from these teachers to better myself as I enter the profession of early childhood education.

Estimated Timeline & Proposed Project Deliverables

Week 8: Begin compiling information for brochure/presentation

Week 9: Continue compiling information, work on & submit “Significance/Assessment” section

Week 10: Presentation- October 29th

Week 11: Consider important moments in my degree work, keep a journal

Week 12: Work on “Retrospective Paper”

Week 13: Submit retrospective paper, consider “Results”

Week 14: Break

Week 15: Submit Project Notebook including deliverables (see below)

Week 16: Work on archiving project, creating poster or slideshow presentation

Week 17: Capstone Festival!

Project Deliverables:

Lesson Plan

High Scope Curriculum: Content Covered

Agenda

Sign-in Sheet

Brochure that was distributed to MAOF preschool teachers

Significance

By recognizing play as being the most important activity a child can take part in, early childhood educators will be better prepared to stimulate the cognitive, social, and emotional growth of preschoolers. Many early childhood educators feel pressure from the outside world (parents, principles, even the government) to make preschool more academic-based. However, when academic material is introduced too soon to a child who is too young, the individual typically begins to feel self-defeated . He or she will ultimately consider school to be a place that is devoid of fun (Pelo, 2008). We are doing young children a terrible injustice by depriving them

of what they do best. Regardless of race, class, or gender, all children can and will benefit from play, if given the opportunity. Therefore, educators must re-examine how they view early childhood education.

My project is designed to assist preschool teachers at The Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF) in examining the way they implement play into the curriculum, review the major benefits of play, and to provide them with a lesson plan that can be used every day in the classroom. The workshop that I have designed will help teachers reflect on what they remember most about their early childhood, which I assume, was all about play and more specifically, pretending. I want them to also reflect on the scenarios their students act out in the classroom. Through play, children act out their hopes, desires, fears, and worries and I predict these teachers will have stories and experiences to help me prove my theory.

I have conducted extensive research on the power of play, particularly through the works of Lev Vygotsky and Vivian Gussin Paley. I intend to share my findings with these teachers and answer any questions they may have. Finally, I want to give them a very powerful tool, in the form of a lesson plan/ activity, which they can use in their own classroom. The MAOF and Head Start, use a curriculum designed by High Scope. After reviewing the High Scope preschool curricular content, I found there are five content areas, with fifty-eight “Key Development Indicators”. The lesson/activity I have created will cover twenty of the fifty-eight KDI’s; simply through play. The lesson was designed this way to exhibit how powerful play can be with just the one activity.

My project is unique to other efforts in that it recognizes academics and play can be one in the same. We can allow children to just be children and still prepare them for kindergarten. As the U.S. attempts to compete with other developing countries, more focus is placed on early literacy and basic math skills, in order to make children “kindergarten ready”.

My objective is to shift the paradigm by identifying what a quality preschool education should look like. Ultimately, it must be play-based in order to provide the best environment and cognitive stimulation for the child.

The education I have received at CSUMB has prepared me to think critically and question certain situations and scenarios. I went into this project hoping to be an advocate for Universal Preschool. I had a firm belief that all children should have access to a quality pre-K education. After some research and guidance from a few special individuals, I began questioning the existing paradigm. For example, *why* are 3- and 4-year-old children learning to read and write? Why did I, personally, feel pressured to have my son, Mikey, in the best preschool in Monterey County? Better yet, why was I so focused on the academic content of the school curriculum? What are we doing wrong in Kindergarten and first grade classrooms that would require us to put an end to what young children enjoy and learn from the most? Play is essential to development and if implemented correctly, has countless possibilities.

I have found myself questioning so many aspects of the topic, it has become my passion to make a change. In fact, I have altered my career plans and hope to work as an early childhood educator. The research and work I have accomplished through this one project has laid the groundwork for what I will build the rest of my career upon.

Assessment

The assessment method I chose to use is a pre and post survey. The ‘pre-survey’ will take on the form of a discussion rather than a formal survey. I intend to ask the teachers I am working with about the ways in which they already implement play in the classroom. This piece of the assessment will be tape-recorded and transcribed at a later time.

After the workshop, I will conduct the post survey. The post-survey is a list of questions

that will assess whether the participants increased their knowledge. Furthermore, I want to know if they intend to use the information presented in the workshop into their own classroom. The pre & post survey will help me evaluate the success of the workshop and what, if anything, I can improve next time. The post survey will be provided to the participants in both English and Spanish.

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5/ Por favor, conteste las siguientes preguntas en una escala de 1 a 5

How useful was the information presented? / ¿Qué tan útil fue la información que se presenta?

Not very useful/ No muy útil		Somewhat / Más o menos		Very useful/ Muy útil
1	2	3	4	5

Did you enjoy the Lego activity? / ¿Le gustó la actividad de Lego?

Not Really/ No es verdad		Somewhat / Más o menos		Very Much/ Muchísimo
1	2	3	4	5

Do you think your preschoolers would enjoy the activity?/ Crees que tus niños en edad preescolar que disfrutar de la actividad?

Not Really / No es verdad		Somewhat/ Más o menos		Very Much/ Muchísimo
1	2	3	4	5

Has this workshop helped to broaden your sense of what play is? / ¿Este taller ha contribuido a ampliar su sentido de lo que es jugar?

Not Really / No es Verdad		Somewhat / Más o menos		Very Much/ Muchísimo
1	2	3	4	5

Do you think you will implement more play into your classroom from what you have learned? / ¿Crees que pondrá en práctica un juego más en su clase de lo que has aprendido?

No		Maybe/ Tal vez		Definitely/ Absolutamente
1	2	3	4	5

Will you explore the suggested readings/books that were recommended? / ¿Va a explorar las lecturas sugeridas / libros que se recomienda?

No		Maybe/ Tal vez		Definitely/ Absolutamente
1	2	3	4	5

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the least and 5 being the most, how effective was the presentation?/ En una escala de 1 a 5, siendo 1 el mínimo y 5 es más, la eficacia fue la presentación?

1	2	3	4	5
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Please write comments or suggestions in the space provided below/ Escriba sus comentarios o sugerencias en el espacio siguiente:

- 1. What are your feelings regarding play?**
- 2. How do you implement play in the classroom?**

Results

The assessment portion of my project conveyed the project turned out very successful. The assessment tool ultimately consisted of three parts: a survey, two short answer questions, and a general discussion. My final sample consisted of eight preschool instructors who had been in the field for an average of seven years.

On all of the questions, each participant found the material to be very useful or found they would definitely take the information with them into the classroom. The short answers were very promising as well. The instructors stated they believe play is an important part of a child's development, they plan to implement more play in the classroom, and play is a motivator for children to come to school.

The general discussion was perhaps the most important piece of the workshop. The participants and I had a significant conversation regarding the pressure they feel in the classroom to make the content more academic. They even claimed to have had parents become angry with them or belittle them when a child is not performing as well as anticipated. They asked if they could use my information when they sit down with parents for conferences in order to explain the importance of play. (I said yes.)

Overall, I am very happy with the way the presentation turned out. The dialogue I was

able to have with the participants proved what I had been researching all along: as academics increase, play decreases. What I did find particularly interesting was their concern about it. They believe in the power of play, but don't feel there is much they can do to keep it alive in the classroom.

If I could do this over again, which I might have the opportunity to do sometime early next year, there is little I would change. I feel I motivated these teachers to stand up for play. I gave them their own small resource to refer to when they are feeling the 'pressure' that we discussed. And most of all, I think I made a difference that will ultimately help the children. One thing I would like to do, if time allows, is actually be in the classroom with one or more of the teachers. I would love to be able to see them in action, see how they implement play already, and then later help them build upon the skills they already have.

When I began this project, I had planned on advocating for Universal Preschool. I had not given a great deal of thought about what a Universal Pre-K should look like or what kind of curriculum it should have. Honestly, I had not thought very deeply about the concept at all. I was lucky enough to have a few key individuals help me see that the idea of Universal Pre-K, must accommodate *all* children, regardless of race, class, or socio-economic status. Additionally, they must all offer the same curriculum. I began to research preschool curricula, in search for the 'best' one. I learned a great deal about the many ways young children are encouraged to learn. The only curriculum that really made sense in the end was one that is strictly play-based because, in the end, play goes hand in hand with academics.

When I first started this endeavor, my own son, had just started preschool. As I did my research and began to recognize the importance of play, my son started bringing home homework. He was *three* years old at the time. Before starting this project, I probably wouldn't

have seen anything wrong with this. In fact, I probably would have condoned it. As I learned more about the importance of play and how children are currently being forced to grow up too quickly; I also began reflecting on my own childhood and what made me happy. My preschool years and my year in Kindergarten was nothing but play. And it was FUN! I realized this is all I want for my own child. I want him to socialize, have the chance to develop friendships, learn what community is all about, and I even want him to make mistakes. Mistakes are, according to educational reformer Deborah Meier, expressions of intelligence. Therefore, because of this project, my son no longer attends preschool.

This project has not only opened my eyes to ideas and concepts I had never before considered, it has changed the way I look at virtually everything. I have a different perspective of young children and the power of what they do and say. I have become a better listener when my own children speak to me; I would even go so far as to say I have become a better mother from all of this. Finally, I have changed my career path and plan on becoming an early childhood educator and an advocate for keeping play in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Lesson Plan/Activity

Objective: The participants (in this case, teachers, will actively participate in a “play” activity, without realizing the intellectual work is being accomplished.

There will be two tables. On one table, there is a set of green and blue legos and a figurine of Winnie the Pooh. On the other table, there is a set of red and yellow legos with a figurine of Tigger. The participants are broken into two teams, one at each table. They are asked to find a way, using the legos, to help Winnie the Pooh get to Tigger’s table. They can do this in any way they want, but there are three rules:

1. Must work together
2. Must use patterns
3. May only speak in Spanish

The participants figure out a way to accomplish the given task. When they are finished they will, as a group, tell a creative *story* explaining how Pooh got to Tigger.

Note: the following is the curriculum content covered during the activity. It was retrieved from the MAOF's 'High Scope' curriculum. Each participant was given a copy as a reference for future use.

High Scope Content Covered w/ Activity:

- Making and expressing choices, plans, and decisions
- Solving problems encountered in play
- Describing objects, events, & relations
- Having fun with language, listening to stories/ poems, making up stories and rhymes
- Dictating stories
- Expressing feelings in words
- Building relationships
- Creating & experiencing collaborative play
- Describing movement
- Acting upon movement directions
- Arranging several things one after another in a series or pattern & describing the relationship
- Fitting one ordered set of objects to another through trial & error
- Arranging 2 sets of objects in one-to-one correspondence
- Fitting things together and taking them apart
- Changing the shape & arrangement of objects
- Experiencing & describing positions, directions, and distances in the play space, building, and neighboring
- Anticipating , remembering, and describing sequences of events
- Participating in group routines
- Being sensitive to the feelings, interests, and needs of others
- Pretending and role playing



Mexican American Opportunity Foundation

Mountain Valley Early Learning Center

Training Agenda

Topic: The Power of Play

October 29, 2010

- I. Welcome/ Introduction/ Ice Breaker
- II. Discussion: Implementing and Encouraging Play in the Classroom
- III. Activity (High Scope Curriculum Content)
- IV. Post Activity
- V. Discussion: Covering Curricular Content
 - Problem Solving Strategies
 - Working collaboratively
 - Having fun w/ language
 - Expressing Creativity
- VI. The Benefits of Play
- VII. Discussion of Research re: The Power of Play
- VIII. Survey / Assessment

By: Elia Aguilar & Krysta Bradley

Mexican



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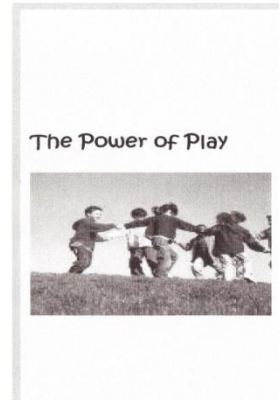
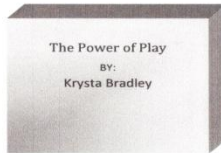
SIGN-IN SHEET

Training: The Power of Play
Location: Mountain Valley Early Learning Center
Presenter: Elia Aguilar (Staff Development Supervisor) & Krysta Bradley
Date: October 29, 2010
Time: 3:00 - 4:30 p.m.

Name	Site
<u>Narcisa Alaba</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Isabel Ayala</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Lilia Gandra</u>	<u>Gonzales</u>
<u>Evangelina yáñez</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Cecilia Mora</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Maria Zavala</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Maria E. Lopez</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Ana Lilia Vidalobos</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Maria Guadalupe Navarro</u>	<u>M.T.V.</u>
<u>Carmen Gutierrez</u>	<u>MTV</u>
<u>Rosaura Rodriguez</u>	<u>M.T.V.</u>
<u>Elia Aguilar</u>	
<u>Yolanda de Lera</u>	

The following is a brochure that was distributed to each of the preschool teachers:

Many preschool teachers feel pressure from parents and the rest of society to create curriculum that is "academic". The rationale is to promote academic achievement and to make children "kindergarten-ready". But, as educators, we must take a step back and look at how this shift is affecting the children. For centuries, children have learned through play. Play promotes moral, perceptual, physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.



Through play, children learn about friendship and how to be a kind person. Children explore the world around them and discover how to be a part of a group or community, which promotes social skills. Children use play as a tool to conquer fears and confront new events or problems. Children also develop a sense of identity about who they are through interaction and play.



The Benefits of Play

- ❖ Play comes naturally to all children
- ❖ Play instills the idea that school is fun!
- ❖ Play improves social skills
- ❖ Play stimulates cognitive development
- ❖ Play helps children learn the rules
- ❖ Play helps children act against impulse
- ❖ During play, a child satisfies his or her needs + desires
- ❖ Fantasy play helps children act out their fears + worries
- ❖ A play-based curriculum will benefit ALL children, regardless of race, class, or socio-economic status

Vivian Gussin Paley taught preschool and kindergarten for 37 years. She has also written 13 outstanding books. More importantly, she is a true inspiration for those who are in the field of early childhood education. Ms. Paley's teaching methods are based on play and interaction. Through her stories, she proves to us why this method works.



Books by Vivian Gussin Paley/ Suggested Reading:

- A Child's Work*
- Mollie is Three: Growing Up in School*
- Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays*
- The Kindness of Children*
- Boys & Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner*
- The Boy on the Beach*
- The Girls with the Brown Crayon*
- In Mrs. Tully's Room*
- You Can't Say You Can't Play*
- Wally's Stories*
- Kwanzaa and Me*
- White Teacher*

Note: Vivian Gussin Paley has written 13 phenomenal books. Each book has its own specific topic, such as fantasy play or multiculturalism. Each book can be read on its own, however, the content becomes much richer if read as a unit.