StudiesWeekly

Learning Through Play: Guided Play as Rigorous Instruction in the Early Grades

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Studies Weekly White Paper

How guided play can support meaningful learning

For young children, play and learning are not competing activities. Children naturally explore ideas by building, pretending, experimenting, talking, moving, questioning, and trying again. Increasingly, educators are examining how these natural ways of learning can be intentionally incorporated into academic instruction.

That does not mean replacing instruction with an extended recess or expecting children to discover everything they need to know on their own. Instead, research into guided play points toward a productive middle ground between completely child-directed play and teacher-directed instruction.

In guided play, teachers establish learning goals and create environments in which students can explore those goals through meaningful choices, interaction, problem-solving, and discovery. Teachers remain active participants in the learning process, providing background knowledge, asking questions, introducing vocabulary, observing students' thinking, and offering support when needed.

Hasn't Play Always Been a Part of Kindergarten?

The academic expectations placed on young students have increased considerably over the past several decades. Kindergarten and the early elementary grades are expected to build foundations in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and other content areas while preparing students for increasingly complex work.

Faced with those expectations, schools can understandably conclude that there is little time available for play.

But that conclusion rests on an assumption that time spent playing is necessarily time taken away from learning.

States are beginning to challenge that assumption. Massachusetts, for example, has developed a Playful Learning Institute to support educators and administrators in preschool through third grade. The state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education describes playful learning as an instructional approach intended to produce deeper learning while maintaining alignment with state curriculum frameworks. The initiative includes professional development and coaching to help educators incorporate playful learning into classroom instruction (Massachusetts Government).

Not All Play Is the Same

Free play is not the same thing as guided play.

Free play does have value. It creates opportunities for children to make decisions, negotiate with peers, develop independence, exercise their imaginations, and pursue their own interests. But free play should not be expected to accomplish every academic objective.

A child may encounter print while pretending to operate a grocery store, for example, but simply providing a pretend grocery store does not ensure that the child will develop a particular literacy skill. Similarly, children building towers may encounter concepts related to balance, measurement, and geometry without necessarily developing the specific mathematical understandings required by grade-level standards.

Guided play adds intentionality. The teacher begins with a learning objective and creates a playful context in which students can explore or apply it. Children retain meaningful agency, but the teacher intentionally selects materials, introduces ideas, asks questions, models language, or presents problems that move students toward the learning goal.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

A 2022 systematic review and meta-analysis published in Child Development examined 39 studies of guided play involving children from ages 1 through 8. The research provides a useful conclusion: guided play can be an effective component of instruction, particularly when children have opportunities to explore, apply ideas, make choices, and solve problems (SRCD), (DOI).

From Acquiring Knowledge to Applying It

One useful way to understand guided play is as a bridge between knowing and doing.

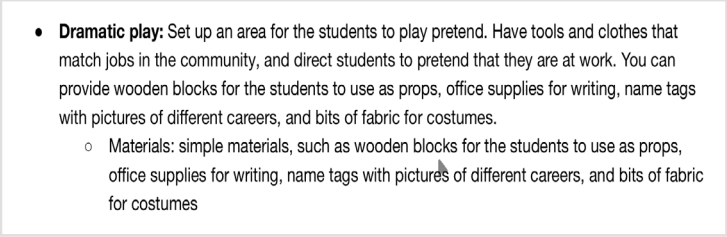
Kimberly Nesbitt, an associate professor at the University of New Hampshire who studies children's cognitive development and playful learning, recommends thinking about play as a way for children to apply knowledge. She also cautions educators to begin with standards and learning objectives rather than creating a playful activity first and attempting to attach academic content afterward (Education Week).

A guided-play model developed by University of New Hampshire researchers similarly incorporates an introduction to prepare students for the experience, time for guided play, and a whole-group reflection afterward (Education Week).

Playful Learning in Kindergarten

Teachers are trained in instructional strategies that have a purpose for learning. However, they don't always know how to transfer that purpose to a playful learning context.

With Studies Weekly, kindergarten students have opportunities to learn through play in every week of content. For example, in this week about jobs, teachers not only have high-quality instructional lesson plans, they also have a variety of options to teach through guided play.



- **Dramatic play:** Set up an area for the students to play pretend. Have tools and clothes that match jobs in the community, and direct students to pretend that they are at work. You can provide wooden blocks for the students to use as props, office supplies for writing, name tags with pictures of different careers, and bits of fabric for costumes.
    - Materials: simple materials, such as wooden blocks for the students to use as props, office supplies for writing, name tags with pictures of different careers, and bits of fabric for costumes

(Example from the state-adopted program, Tennessee: The World Around Us, Week 10: Jobs)

Is it Okay to Have Fun at School?

Free play, imagination, friendship, movement, laughter, and exploration are meaningful parts of childhood and provide valuable learning opportunities for students.

Schools can protect space for those experiences while also recognizing that play can be focused to become an instructional tool.

The strongest approach is not a choice between teacher-directed learning and child-directed discovery. Young learners need knowledgeable teachers who explicitly teach important content and skills. They also need opportunities to explore ideas, make meaningful choices, communicate, collaborate, experiment, and solve problems.

Guided play creates a bridge between the two.

The key to making that bridge is to intentionally set learning goals for each playful activity. Teachers ask themselves what students will learn from the activity and what they will be able to do.

When play is grounded in clear academic goals, meaningful student agency, active application, strategic teacher guidance, and reflection, play gives students a place to put their learning to work.

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