2.4: The Role of Play in Children’s Learning and Development

Consider the learning under way in the following excerpt volume 2 of the California Preschool Curriculum Framework (CDE 2011b, 15).

Imagine four young children—eager and engaged in play amidst an assortment of wooden blocks. They may appear to be “just playing”; however, upon closer inspection, this moment of play reveals a web of ideas, theories, and hypotheses under construction, as well as an energetic debate. We may observe that the children are negotiating how to connect the blocks to make roads that will surround their carefully balanced block structure. The structure has walls of equal height, which support a flat roof, from which rise 10 towers, built using cardboard tubes. Resting on each tube is a shiny, recycled jar lid, each one a different color. Two children are figuring out between themselves when to add or take away blocks in order to make a row of towers that increases in height. As we listen and watch, we witness the children building a foundation for addition and subtraction. To make each wall just high enough to support a flat roof, they count aloud the number of blocks they are using to make each wall, showing an emerging understanding of the math concept of cardinal numbers. When they hear the signal that lunch is about to be served, one child finds a clipboard with pen and paper attached, draws a rudimentary outline of the block structure on the paper, and then asks the teacher to write, “Do not mess up. We are still working on our towers.”

In this example, children show evidence of emerging concepts of social studies through their construction of a small community from blocks; of physical science and mathematics as they experiment with how to make objects balance; and of reading, writing, and drawing as they request the teacher's help with making a sign to protect their work. They work together to create their play and cooperate in carrying out agreed upon plans. Each is fully engaged and manages his behavior to cooperate in a complex social situation. The concepts under construction in the minds of these children and the skills they are learning and practicing closely match several desired learning outcomes for children at this age. Anticipating the variety of concepts and skills that would emerge during the play, the teachers stocked the blocks/construction area with collections of blocks, props, and writing materials to support a full range of possibilities.
Young children’s ways of learning require an approach to curriculum that allows them to build concepts and skills in integrated learning contexts. Such an approach supports children with analyzing a problem to discover a possible solution, experimenting with and testing ideas, exchanging ideas with others, thinking creatively and cooperating with others to reach a goal, and focusing their attention and organizing their behavior as they play with others. These skills and dispositions work together to give children a foundation that enhances development and learning in all the domains.[1]

Preschool programs use numerous strategies to support children’s play, such as planning the learning environment, providing engaging and appropriately challenging materials, and being responsive to children’s interest in engaging in play.

Through observations of children’s play, teachers can deepen their appreciation of the value of play in early learning. For example, imaginary play is an important means of exploring ideas and social behavior and roles among preschool-age children. While older infants and toddlers engage in solitary imaginary play, such as feeding a stuffed animal or making a roaring sound while pushing a toy truck across the carpet, preschoolers engage with one or more peers in the more complex and elaborate form of imaginary play called “sociodramatic” play. In this type of play, children cooperate with one another to create a story and “script,” assume various roles, figure out appropriate “costumes” and “props,” and negotiate new ideas for play, such as, “I want to be a wolf, not a dog!”

Because imaginary play holds such rich potential for promoting children’s cognitive, linguistic, social, and physical development, high-quality preschool programs recognize play as a key element of the curriculum. Children’s spontaneous play is a window into their ideas and feelings about the world. As such, it is a rich source of ideas for curriculum planning (Lockett 2004). For example, if a teacher observes a group of children repeatedly engaging in imaginary play about illness or hospitalization, she or he might decide to convert the playhouse area into a veterinary clinic for a week or two. The teacher might also read children stories involving doctors, hospitals, getting sick, and getting well. The teacher’s observations of children’s resulting conversations and activities would suggest ways to deepen or extend the curriculum further. In thinking of ways to extend the curriculum, it will be important that teachers ensure that the materials used and themes built upon are culturally familiar to the children and value children’s cultural heritage.

While involved in play, children are challenged to meet the language, problem-solving, and social competencies of their peers. When play is interesting and important to children, they are eager to learn the new vocabulary, new physical skills, and new social behaviors that will allow them to stay engaged in play (Jones and Reynolds 2011). Many three-year-olds, for example, have not yet mastered socially appropriate ways to enter other children’s play. Coaching by a sensitive, observant teacher on appropriate language for asking to join play can help a child overcome this hurdle, thereby opening a new area for learning.

When teachers regularly observe and document brief, subtle moments of children’s learning through play, those records can help parents and others understand how useful and important play is in helping children to learn and grow. For example, a teacher might report a child’s language and social development to the parent of a three-year-old: “I watched Sarah standing outside the playhouse area today. Instead of just watching the other children or wandering through their play without getting involved as she often does, she brought the children a book to read to the ‘baby’ in the family. They asked her if she wanted to be the big sister, and she said yes and joined right in. I have been thinking about ways to help her learn how to use her language to get involved in play with other children, but she figured out her own, creative
During the preschool years, children grow markedly in their knowledge and skills in all areas of development. The dramatic increase in their emotional, social, cognitive, and language knowledge and skills occurs hand in hand with development of key areas of the brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex and its connections with the limbic system. Preschool-age children are naturally curious and driven to learn about the way the world works and often develop and test hypotheses through observation and experimentation. Children’s learning and development in all domains progresses well when they are provided with appropriately challenging opportunities for play and exploration, with the support of skilled teachers who scaffold learning experiences.[2]

References

[1] The Integrated Nature of Learning by the California Department of Education is used with permission (pg. 15-16)

[2] California Preschool Program Guidelines by the California Department of Education is used with permission (pg. 32-33)