

Imagine All the Children Learning

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I. Background:

Description of Teaching Context

I am an intern in the Penn State Professional Development School program at Radio Park Elementary in a full-day kindergarten setting. In my classroom, there is a great mix of interests, ability levels, and ages. One child in my classroom turned five the day before school began. I have children in my classroom who have not had much experience playing with other children. One child in my classroom rarely interacted with other children or played with anything other than a computer before coming into the classroom in October. Play is something completely new to him. Many of the other children have come from preschools where play is not emphasized, so they are still learning how to play. I had never before experienced children that did not know how to play and use fantasy. Many of the encounters I had in my classroom with my children led me to investigate the use of fantasy in the classroom.

What Led Me to My Wonderings?

It is my belief that outstanding educators make learning engaging for students by connecting student interests to the curriculum. The children in my class were often engaged during playtime, and I wondered if there was a way that I could harness that excitement and incorporate it in their learning. I also saw that some children hardly played with other children. I had heard that some kindergartens and some preschools rarely let students leave their desks and did not allow for much student play. I began to wonder why some teachers chose to involve play in their classrooms and why some did not. Certainly, whether or not a teacher chooses to use play in the classroom, its absence or inclusion is a conscious decision by educators and should be investigated. The arrival of a new student in October that did not have prior experience with

play of any kind made me wonder about how that contributed to his development. Would he be able to become a part of the classroom without playing with the other children?

What Others Think/Know About this Topic

In my research, I have found that there are varying opinions about using play in the classroom.

1. Barbara Osburg (“A Failure of the Imagination”)

- ◆ Osburg (2003) believes that teachers should not implement imagination simply for the sake of using imagination. When trying to extend literature in the classroom, teachers will often try to be creative without thinking about the context of the stories. Osburg believes that knowledge and imagination have to work together, not separate from each other.
- ◆ Osburg brings me to the realization that including fantasy within my classroom will not automatically help my students learn. I must have a purpose for the fantasy and the fantasy must have a valid connection to what the students are learning.

2. M.M. Spencer (“What More Needs Saying About Imagination?”)

- ◆ Spencer (2002) believes that imagination is key to reading and writing and cannot be separated from thinking. According to Spencer, play is how children make sense of the world, and the imagination children use during play is linked to their history and culture. Imagination also lets children learn how to interact in the world and step out of themselves, which builds empathy and sympathy. Spencer also states that imagination is the key to language development.

- ◆ The students in my class are still in the developmental stage of ego-centrism. They often cannot predict how another person might feel in a given situation, which often causes problems in the classroom. If imagination is a tool to help build sympathy and empathy it would greatly help my classroom.

3. Kieran Egan (“Start With What the Student Knows or With What the Student Can Imagine?”)

- ◆ Kieran (2003) questions the common belief that humans can only build on what they know. If learning only occurs through building upon something already known, it can never begin. In addition, if a problem occurs when learning something new, then taking away some of the newness should not make learning easier. Children imagine beyond what they know. This proves that their thinking is not limited by what is in their close environment or what they have already experienced. Egan also states that many authors do not stick to what they children know, yet children are enthralled with their stories and can learn from them.
- ◆ This led me to question many of my beliefs and led me to the space-themed lessons that I will discuss in detail later in the paper. Perhaps abstract concepts can be taught through fantasy.

4. Elena Bodrova and Deborah J. Leong (“The Importance of Being Playful”)

- ◆ Bodrova and Leong (2003) argue that play should move away from simply being an early education strategy because play is not only interesting, but with the correct support, it enhances learning. There are stages of play that children go through before arriving at mature play. Mature play has imaginary situations,

multiple roles, clearly defined rules, and flexible themes. It also develops language and involves an extended length of play. Children will spend days on one theme, elaborating, extending, and discovering the possibilities the theme has to offer.

- ◆ Teachers should support imaginary play. They can create imaginary situations with which the children can experiment. They should also integrate different themes and roles that the children might not have the ability to come up with on their own. In developing mature play, and extending play, teachers should have the children plan out their play. This will help the children stay focused longer on themes.
- ◆ Classrooms without the opportunity for play would likely experience classroom management issues; such as, children that do not know how to interact with other children or other people in general, and disinterest in language arts.
- ◆ This article shows me that play and imagination can, and should, be used for more than student interest. I realize now that it is integral to the development of the students within my classroom.

5. Alan Rogers (“What’s the Difference?”)

- ◆ Rogers (2003) places learning into two categories: task-conscious and learning-conscious. Task-conscious learning is characterized by play, fantasy, exploration, imitation, and experimentation and occurs when the learner decides if a task is completed. Learning-conscious learning occurs when someone other than the learner decides whether something is learned. Both types of learning have their own strengths and limitations, so it is best to include both in the

classroom. Task-conscious learning, while concrete, conforms to societal norms, is unconscious, and not applicable to other contexts. Learning-conscious learning is abstract, and does not connect to the experience of the learner.

- ◆ This article brought me to the understanding that there is no one way that children or adults learn. It discussed ways in which both children and adults can use the same types of learning strategies. When adults predict possible problems, they are using their imagination. It is important for adults to remember that imagination is not used solely in childhood; it is a skill that will be used throughout their lives.

Wonderings/Questions

Are fantasy and play necessary components of an elementary school classroom?

- a. What are the benefits of fantasy and play?
- b. Is there an academic benefit to including fantasy and play?
- c. Would learning through fantasy help elementary students of all ages?

II. Inquiry Plan:

Implementation in My Classroom

I decided to integrate fantasy and play in my classroom by including playful lessons when the opportunity arose. For two weeks, I spent most afternoons teaching geometry in a playful manner. The students were introduced to a story about a hedgehog whose house had burned down and who had been searching for a new place to live. The children created their own hedgehogs, complete with names and personalities, and began working on discovering the

best three-dimensional house they could find for their hedgehog. This allowed them to discover the properties of three-dimensional shapes without focusing on the fact that they were learning. They were very concerned about the well-being of their hedgehogs and would often inquire about when they could “play” with them. Every other day they made new three-dimensional houses for their hedgehogs out of different shapes. I often heard discussions about whether their hedgehogs liked their homes or not. Many of the students truly seemed to enjoy their daily interactions with their hedgehogs, and some children even built a town for their hedgehogs on their own with various materials we had around the room.

I also created opportunities for the students to use what we were learning on their own. For example, during a mini-unit based on community, I had the children create a town in the back of the room, which they could then play with on their own. The children came up with what buildings they wanted to include in the town, created the buildings out of boxes that we had covered with paper, and then decorated them. The children created all the parts of communities that we had discussed. They created people, homes, workplaces, parks, streets, and other things that are contained in a community. During playtime, they were encouraged to play and interact in the town they had created. Encouraging them to play in their town gave them the opportunity to use the vocabulary introduced to them throughout the community mini-unit.

During my research, I discovered that teachers should support imaginary play through creating situations with which the students can experiment (Bodrova 3). I attempted to do that by introducing a town for the children to play with and through bringing in personal connections to what they were learning. For example, when we learned about astronauts we did not learn only about the instruments astronauts used but also about the types of things that they did, such as how they ate, what they wore, and other such pieces of information. This allowed the students

to see astronauts as humans, and something that they themselves could become. They could put themselves in the situation of being an astronaut when they saw the connections between the astronauts and themselves. Students also interacted during fantasy-based lessons that I created. The class and I pretended that we were going off into space together. All we had were our bodies and our minds and we blasted off to visit every planet. Students would call out things in space that they saw along the way, such as the meteor belt. We experienced thirty minutes on each planet in pursuit of our puppet, Shep, who had taken a trip a few days ahead of us. Students adored these travels and often asked when they would be going off into space again.

Occasionally, children in my classroom did not want to work out issues they were having with other children in the class on their own. When prompted to tell someone what was bothering them, many students would remain quiet, which would prevent the resolution of the issue. My mentor introduced stuffed animals through which the children could talk. Students were allowed to talk as their stuffed animals with other people to explain what made them upset. This was an excellent conflict resolution tool.

We also have many items in the room that children can use for dramatic play. We have blocks, realistic everyday items (such as food, plates, cups and utensils), clothing, scarves, and a house area. Once a day children are allowed to play with these. When students played with these items, they got to experience life in different roles. They could build important empathy and sympathy skills through imagining life in someone else's world. Students often experienced social issues during dramatic play. They worked through learning how to share, and how to get along, which they often did not do during teacher-directed lesson times.

One of the students in my class, "Jana," has very little interest in writing, and generally has low confidence in her abilities to write. I decided to introduce fantasy to motivate her to

write and to give her confidence. I presented her with a toy frog. I explained to her that the frog told me how much it wanted to learn to write. I told her that he specifically chose her because he thought he could learn the most from her. I hoped that this would help build her confidence. “Jana” named the frog Marker and she knew that when she felt she needed him she could get him from my desk, where she told me he lived. She now uses that frog every day for writing and has for about a month. She says how smart her frog has become because she has taught it well. The adults in the room know that whenever she begins a tantrum about writing they just have to mention that Marker told them that he wants to learn today and she will happily go get him and begin writing. The frog has also become an assessment tool because she often talks with the frog and tells him everything she knows about writing.

How I Collected Data

I began collecting data by investigating education journals and articles. I wanted to see what the experts said so that I could look at my own classroom and either discount or accept what I read. I gained a lot of insight into what fantasy could look like in various age levels. I also wanted to have sound background knowledge before I began implementing any ideas. The research brought new ideas to my mind and helped me realize that there was more to fantasy than I had imagined. Another method I chose was to write down observations both during lessons and after lessons. I did this because observations during lessons revealed things that I noticed immediately and observations after lessons allowed me to see the overall picture. In addition, my PDA observed my classroom and my lessons. This was a huge help to me because often I could not see what individual students were doing at all times. She also gave me wonderful insights into how I was teaching and how the students reacted. Sitting down and

talking with her after a lesson always led me to a clearer view of how the lesson went. This was especially helpful when I tried to compare lessons that I had done with and without fantasy. A third method of collection I chose was to give informal surveys to the students. Questions that I asked were what they thought of certain lessons, and why they had those responses. I also asked them what their favorite part of certain lessons was.

Within my school, there are nine other interns. During a few of our weekly intern meetings I asked them if they had used any fantasy in their own rooms, what it looked like if they did, and how they felt it worked for them. I then wrote down the information. It was helpful to have information from a variety of grades. From kindergarten through fifth grade, interns were using fantasy as a teaching and learning tool.

How I Analyzed Data

Analyzing my data began as a daunting task. I had so much information in front of me and it was overwhelming to think that I had to go through all of it to come to conclusions about my project. I have never been particularly good at finding my own ways of organization, so I became apprehensive about the task. Eventually, I mustered up the courage to begin reading all of my notes. Through doing that, I realized that there were many commonalities in my data.

Here is an outline of the steps I took in analyzing my data:

1. I looked through my pile of data for pieces of information concerning engagement and marked those with an orange sticky note.
2. I looked for information discussing the benefits of play.
 - a. I looked at lessons that were fantasy based and non-fantasy based. Then I compared the two lessons by looking at how well each went. The students were more engaged during the lessons based on fantasy than they were during lessons

where fantasy was not incorporated. I wrote a journal entry where I compared the two lessons and clearly discussed the positive differences I noticed with the fantasy-based lesson.

- b. I looked through the data that I had and distinguished between the growth in language, emotion, and social interaction that I observed. Students used some situation-specific language in their play that they had learned during lessons.
3. I marked anything that discussed the ages of the students involved in fantasy. I found that any age group can learn through fantasy, even adults. Not one learning strategy is connected to a specific age group (Rogers 2003).

III. What I Have Learned

Claims of What I Know With Supporting Evidence

Claim A: Fantasy can make abstract ideas tangible.

How I know this: I compared two lessons on space: One lesson that did not involve fantasy and then another lesson that did. My journal entry for that week discussed how engaged students were with the fantasy lesson, and how terribly the non-fantasy lesson went. The non-fantasy lesson was awful because the students were not engaged in it at all. Students often did not pay attention to the lesson and complained of boredom. The fantasy lesson was great because they were excited to be there. Every day they asked if they were going into space again. This proved that there was a difference between the two lessons and that the fantasy-based lesson was the better of the two lessons. I have had plenty of lessons that were engaging for the students that did not involve fantasy, but they were not as abstract as the lessons on space. Children cannot go into space on their

own without fantasy, so it was hard for them to envision what I asked them to without using their imaginations. Imagination was one way of making the lesson tangible for them. Further proof was found in the survey I conducted with the children. I had asked them why they did or did not enjoy the trips to space and one girl said that she loved the trips because she was able to see “cool” things. That tells me that the children do, in fact, “see” things in their imaginations that they would not be able to see otherwise.

Claim B: Fantasy and play help children to develop their language, social, and emotional skills.

How I know this: Some children in my classroom had issues with their social skills. Some were not sure how to interact with other children and they complained of not having friends in the classroom. Once they went through the stages of immature play and started to go through mature play, they began interacting with other children. “Billy” could not find someone that he could play with. Every day, he came in crying and saying that he wanted to go home. When he played, he always used parallel play where he would play with the blocks next to another child but he would never include that child in his play. Once he advanced from that stage, he began interacting with the other children while he was playing and he started making more friends. He no longer comes into school crying. Play enhanced his social skills, while also improving his emotional well-being.

A few girls in my class exclude other girls. The girls who were being excluded did not want to work out their issues with the excluding children on their own. When stuffed animals were introduced the girls used the toys as a voice for their concerns. Eventually the issues were worked out without much facilitation by the teachers. This

solved the social issues that were occurring, as well as the emotional issues that the girls were experiencing. Recently, the girls have begun to discuss their concerns with each other without the aid of a toy.

During a few of the interactions I observed, the children used vocabulary that had been introduced earlier in the year or that was specific to the types of fantasies they were acting out. During a math activity, when they were making animals out of paper pattern blocks, I heard students talking about characteristics of their animals. One student talked about his shark's digestive system and bones, which we had discussed earlier in the month. I found that art was a way of acting out fantasy. During play times when the students were acting out roles in space, I heard students talking about how the spaceships they made had to take the "bad air" that they could not breathe and turn it into "good air" that they could. They explored the concepts we talked about and included the new vocabulary, which gave them opportunities to use words that they might not have been able to use otherwise.

Claim C: Fantasy can increase interest and motivation

How I know this: During the weeks where I focused on lessons based in fantasy, my students constantly asked when the lessons would occur. During the hedgehog, geometry lessons the students spent a lot of time working on their projects for their hedgehogs. They made sure that the houses for their "pets" were comfortable and that their hedgehogs would love them. Every day the kids came in and asked if they could "play" with their hedgehogs. This shows me that the students were very interested in the fantasy based geometry lessons. The same interest was found during the space lessons that I

created. Every day the students would come in and ask if they could go into space on that day. In contrast, the lesson where the students did not get to use their imaginations went terribly and the students complained of boredom. Finally, I know that imagination increases motivation and interest because of my wonderful student, “Jana.” “Jana” has completely turned around since she was introduced to the frog she named Marker. She now writes every day, and actually asks to write on her own, which she never did before. Writing was always a task that she would try to avoid until we integrated fantasy into her writing.

IV. Conclusions and Future Directions

Implications for Future Practice as a Teacher

This inquiry project has altered many of my previous assumptions about teaching. I had previously thought that play and fantasy were used only for student excitement. Many of the lessons I remembered from my own childhood were fantasy based, even through the intermediate grades. I remembered them because they represented times when I was excited to be in school. What I did not realize then was that I was learning more than how to have a good time. I realize now that I was also learning how to interact with other children and I was learning about my place in the world as well. I could explore my own ideas as well as the ideas of other children in my class.

One of my goals as an educator is to build student interest in learning. I had originally thought that this inquiry would lead me to a strategy that would increase interest, but I have learned so much more. Now I realize that play and fantasy must become a part of the classroom

for children to develop fully important language and social skills. If I want to help my students become productive members of society, I must help them develop good social skills. Play and fantasy help build the crucial social skills that they will use throughout their lives.

Although I will be integrating play and fantasy into my classroom, I must remember that I cannot just throw fantasy into my classroom expecting the children to learn from it. I must consider what I want my children to learn, as well as effective methods of achieving that. It is my responsibility to have a plan behind everything I do in the classroom. As Barbara Osburg (2003) mentions, it can be dangerous to include fantasy just for the sake of having fantasy because fantasy must have a valid connection to what the students are learning.

I must also remember to often leave the children to their own playtime, but also to guide the children through play. Sometimes children need guidance to discover situations that they might not have thought of without the help of another person. Other times, however, they need to be left to their own discoveries. I found that out in my own classroom. The children came up with ideas that I had never thought of before. It would be a shame for the students to not be able to build their own worlds through their imaginations.

New Wonderings Developed

Through this inquiry project, I have gained a wealth of information and insight into how I must be as a teacher. I do not feel, however, as if I have all of the answers yet. I now have new questions that I would like to answer. The questions that I now have are:

1. What would happen if academic demands lessened the amount of play that occurred in the youngest grades?
 - What would a student who was part of that environment be like in the older grades?

2. If play is delayed in the younger grades, will the students have the same language development as students who were allowed to play in the younger grades?
 - Would that affect social and emotional development?
3. Does fantasy embedded in technology have the same effect as traditional fantasy?
4. Would toys that are already connected to a story have the same effect as toys that are not connected to a story?
5. With so many time constraints, and so many academic demands, how can I find the time to integrate fantasy and play into my own classroom?
6. How can I help students that did not go through immature play? How can I guide them into mature play?

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