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Are We Doing Kindergarten All Wrong?

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Abstract

Kindergarten within the American educational system little resembles the original ideals of its founder, Friedrich Froebel (Muelle, 2013). As our society embraces the "more is better" mantra, this ideal is seeping into our educational system, and most notably into our kindergarten classrooms. As academic kindergartens replace social-centered kindergartens, the teaching of mathematical and grammatical concepts has resulted in the loss of free play and exploration therefore changing the whole kindergarten landscape (Curwood, 2007). While the United States shifts to academic kindergartens, there is an equally notable shift in Finland that is revolutionizing kindergarten in its devotion to kindergartens' original intentions: social imitation, learning through expression, and systemized play.



Kindergarten, a word that comes from two German words, *kinder* meaning child and *garten* meaning garden, was originally a means of socializing young children and educating them through play (Headley, 1965). The emphasis of kindergarten was for children to become socially integrated and to guide them in their growth to becoming whole people (Froebel, 1967a). Froebel's (1967a) original ideals for education in the kindergarten setting started with children simply being allowed to free play that would later develop into more complex games. Emphasis on play was the original cornerstone for the first year in formal education because Froebel felt that was the way in which a child was able to learn most effectively (Froebel, 1974). Froebel's core curriculum was centered on "gifts" that allowed for students to learn with neither rigorous structure nor heavy curriculum. Froebel (1967b) based his educational concept for kindergarten on the three basic components of educating young children through social imitation, learning through expression, and systemized play within the classroom. Kindergarten within the American educational system little resembles the original ideals of its founder, Friedrich Froebel (Muelle, 2013). As our society embraces a "more is better" mantra, the ideal seeps into our educational system, and most notably into our kindergarten classrooms. As academic kindergartens replace social-centered kindergartens, the teaching of mathematical and grammatical concepts has resulted in the loss of free play and exploration therefore changing the whole kindergarten landscape (Curwood, 2007). While the United States shifts to academic kindergartens, there is an equally notable shift in Finland that is revolutionizing kindergarten in its devotion to kindergartens' original intentions: social imitation, learning through expression, and systemized play.

In recent years, Finland has become quite the sensation in the academic world for two reasons: the consistently strong scores of Finnish students on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Finland's approach to kindergarten. Finland, a nation of 5.5

million people, has government paid kindergarten education that starts at age 6. For Finnish children, kindergarten is more reflective of Froebel's ideals for educating young children, as most of the day focuses around play, not academics (Walker, 2015). A Finnish preschool teacher, Anni-Kaisa Osei Ntiamoah, describes the children's view of learning, "Children learn so well through play. They don't even realize that they are learning because they're so interested in what they are doing" (Walker, 2015, para. 14). Osei Ntiamoah also explains that through play, they are developing academic skills through the use of their social interaction skills. Osei Ntiamoah's observations of Finnish children at play and the many skills they are learning and perfecting along the way is supported by the research in the article, *The Power of Play*. "Play presents children with a particularly strong opportunity to learn because it meets the needs of the whole, individual child. All domains of children's development – cognitive, social, emotional, and physical – are intricately intertwined" (White, 2012, p. 8).

According to Walker (2015), who spent a day observing and learning about pedagogical concepts of the Finnish kindergarten, play is the center of curriculum. Finnish children only complete desk work one day a week. With the remaining four days of the week, there is little in way of a daily plan, instead a more fluid weekly plan that only has several "major" activities on any given day is the guide. Each day is loosely dedicated to broader concepts that allow for freedom of play, resulting in interaction and expression through that play. Several concepts that one might find throughout the week at a Finnish kindergarten include: days outside exploring and enjoying nature, field trips, ball games and running, songs and stations, etc. Throughout these many activities that keep play at the forefront, there is quite a bit of pedagogical theory that helps teachers guide their weekly lessons. There are two ways in which the children engage in play: spontaneous and free (little boys building dams) and guided play (little girls selling ice cream and giving back change). Each form of play leads

to a different, but equally important, developmental maturation of each child, regardless of their ability to hold a pencil, write their name, or to simply sit still and each of these forms of play are addressed in each Finnish kindergarten classroom.

While play is paramount, students are exposed to books and curriculum as well, but with the understanding that the child's needs and skills lead the learning, not a preconceived notion of what the child "should" be able to do by a certain time in the school year. There was a time, not so long ago, when teachers were not allowed to teach reading. The belief was that that was what a child learned to do in first grade. Now, as teachers meet and make individualized plans for each kindergarten student, reading is allowed to be taught if the child is willing and has an interest in learning to read (Walker, 2015). Reading and academics come in second to the emotional and social maturity of a child. This approach to reading and attention to child development results in no harm or delayed ability to read. Research confirms that whether students learn to read at age five or at age seven, by age eleven they are reading at the same level and demonstrate the same reading skills (Walker, 2015). If there are no disadvantages to delayed reading instruction, then perhaps the approach to letting kindergarteners enjoy books for the sake of books, allows them to develop an appreciation for reading and learning in a more organic manner.

Arja-Sisko Holappa, a counselor for the Finnish National Board of Education, states, "Play is a very efficient way of learning for children. And we use it in a way the children will learn with" (Walker, 2015, para.29). Joy is such a beautiful way to describe the learning process for young children when learning is done in a way that promotes growth, not anxiety. Holappa adds, "There is an old Finnish saying – those things you learn without joy you will forget easily" (Walker, 2015, para. 30). If a school prescribes to that school of thinking, then all of the frustration and anxiety that comes from an academic centered classroom is all for naught, and what a sad loss of time, potential, and

learning that so many kindergarteners are missing for the sake of "academics" while they could be playing (Walker, 2015).

Play, such an important aspect of childhood, should not be lost in the misguided quest to improve test scores. Play is so instrumental in a child's development and a key component in education practices that in 1989, the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights "recognized it as a fundamental right of every child" (White, 2012, p. 5). Childhood is such a short time in a human life, and yet all of the development that takes place during those critical years can have a profound impact on a child's life. Instead of viewing children as learning machines that have to meet a set standard by the end of their kindergarten year, as a nation we should be calling for the return of play to our kindergarten classrooms. We owe children the chance to be children, and we have to protect this time in their life because they cannot do it for themselves. One parting thought that puts childhood and the necessity of play into focus is this, "the skills children learn through play in the early years set the stage for future learning and success from the kindergarten classroom to the workplace" (White, 2012, p. 8). We owe our nation's children the best, and to accomplish that all we have to do is allow them to do what comes naturally, play.

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