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**The Importance of Learning Through Play in Early Childhood Education:  
Reflection on *The Bold Beginnings* Report**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, authors reflect on the implications of the report titled "*Bold Beginnings: The Reception Curriculum in a Sample of Good and Outstanding Primary Schools*" (Ofsted, 2017). This report is a review of curriculum for four-and five-year-old children in the United Kingdom. The *Bold Beginnings* report argues for teaching young children more academic subjects, instead of introducing learning through play. The report claims when children learn more academic curriculum early without spending too much time on play, they become ready and qualified in their academic lives which in turn, makes instruction easier for their future elementary school teachers.

In contrast, this paper focuses on the importance of allowing young children to learn naturally through a variety of play experiences. The authors argue play is holistic and provides children with a range of support including mental and emotional well-being, social interactions, and physical challenges. The premise for this paper underscores the critical importance that children play and learn about the world with relevance, authenticity, and developmentally appropriate opportunities. Early childhood settings become an extraordinary space for this natural and

holistic learning to occur. After describing how play most effectively accommodates children's unique needs and individual development, authors explain how learning through play provides children the opportunities to grow in a risk-free environment, communicate with peers, express feelings and thoughts, discover and investigate various subjects, improve social-emotional skills, develop language and vocabulary, enhance cognitive capacity, build self-esteem, prepare for life, and establish a foundation for the next stage of school. Early childhood teachers can help students to do all this and more by providing learning through play.

**Keywords:** Play-based learning, learning through play, academic curriculum, early childhood settings, early learning, children's holistic development.

### **Critique of *Bold Beginnings* Report**

*Bold Beginnings: The Reception Curriculum in a Sample of Good and Outstanding Primary Schools* (Ofsted, 2017) report highlights the importance of early learning in preparing four- to five-year-old children for an effective and supportive transition to kindergarten in the United Kingdom. Ofsted is the acronym for *The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills* whose main purpose is to regulate and inspect childcare. The Majesty's Chief Inspector of Ofsted (2017) collected data for the period of 2016-17. The report generated data using a thematic survey, school visits, an online questionnaire, and analyzed more than 150 inspection reports of primary schools in the UK. The aim of this report was to gain a deep understanding of the curriculum and how it is implemented. Ofsted used the information sources and observations of 41 school visits to compare these schools and distinguish differences in practices. This data is intended to improve the different aspects of education such as informing policy makers, advising counselors, and influencing curriculum designers, as well as impacting the global thinking about the importance of academic curriculum.

The Ofsted report describes the potential of using academic curricula to teach the basics of reading, writing, and mathematics to young children as well as to prepare them for life and their first year of school. According to the report, it is important for children to learn these academic skills and apply them in the early years. In addition, this report discusses how children who daily practice the academic skills demonstrate academic success in later years. Furthermore, the report claims successful learning programs set their targets with appropriate academic curricula to meet children's needs for the first year of school instruction. For example, the report suggests that teachers instruct reading through systematic phonics direct instruction and teach mathematics with a focus on children's ability to count and compare numbers. The report states that "the ability to read, write and use numbers is fundamental. They are the building blocks for all other learning. Without firm foundations in these areas, a child's life chances can be severely restricted. The basics need to be taught – and learned – well, from the start" (Ofsted, 2017, p. 10). *Bold Beginnings* emphasizes transforming learning in the early-childhood setting from free-play, exploration, and child-guided experiences to traditional, direct instruction based on literacy, mathematical understanding, teachers' guidance, and less play. However, an open letter signed by more than 1,850 educators believe this report should be rejected as it would have a negative effect on children and undervalues play-based approaches for children (TACTYC, 2017; Ward, 2018).

## What is Early Childhood?

Are the early years an important designation of time for children to learn through play? The Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [MOE] (n.d.) recognizes early childhood as a stage in which children require nursery education and learning through exploration and play; this means, teachers should prepare children, ages three to six, for entry into general education with the important foundation of play. In the United States of America, the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] (n.d.) defines early childhood as a period of time in which children go through a rapid period of development and growth. NAEYC indicates that children's brains develop quickly, so these years are essential for the foundation of children's social skills, self-esteem, and cognitive development. Moreover, Heikkilä, Ihalainen, and Välimäki (2004) emphasize that early childhood settings are places where children spontaneously play and interact educationally. Such settings promote the balanced growth, venues of learning and development, and are designed to advance children's knowledge and realization.

The online Free Dictionary (n.d.) defines early childhood as "the early stages of growth or development." According to the online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.), the Old-English word *cildhad* divides the word into "child and hood" and means the "state of being a child; period of life birth to puberty." The online Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) also references the Old-English word *cildhad* and defines early childhood as the "state or period of being a child." These three online dictionaries agree that early childhood is the time of being a child.

## Theories in Play

The "time of being a child" is the focus of many early childhood theorists. According to Mooney (2013), Dewey's, Montessori's, Erikson's, Piaget's, and Vygotsky's theories stress the importance of learning through play in early childhood settings. These theorists agree that "education should be child centered; education must be both active and interactive; and education must involve the social world of the child and the community" (Mooney, 2013, p. 4). Play provides all these necessary components (Dewey, 1938; Montessori, 2008; Piaget, 1962; 1976; Vygotsky, 1976).

Children will easily explore and learn through play in an effective way, including content skills. The most important role of children's educational setting is to build their experiences based on their past learning and knowledge and help the students to understand the content effectively. Preparing the environment for children's learning is a vital task that every teacher in the early-childhood setting seeks to accomplish. In a prepared and planned environment, children will learn by exploring, discovering, investigating, thinking, and using the materials in their classrooms.

Montessori (2008) believes that children learn effectively through sensory experiences and can develop life skills through interactive classroom opportunities. Piaget (1962, 1976) emphasizes the idea that the interactions between the children and their environments create learning. Piaget and Montessori describe the importance of an open environment which provides a range of possibilities for children to discover and construct. Piaget (1976) also stresses the importance of

play as an important avenue for learning (Mooney, 2013). Through play, children experience opportunities to become well prepared for life and fully develop in mental, physical, emotional, and social ways.

Furthermore, Vygotsky (2004) confirms that children learn when play takes place in their journey of learning and development. Vygotsky transformed the ways in which educators think and view play. Play is an essential part of children's learning in all different domains. In addition, he believes development and language remain connected and build on one another, and play assumes an integral role in children's development and learning. He highlights in his explanation of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that teacher's scaffold children's learning and development through play-based learning. In this ZPD, through play, teachers can support children at the first stage and then withdraw slowly so children can independently complete the task. Children can go beyond their limits of their ZPD with the support of the teacher through play.

### **The Importance of Learning through Play in Early Childhood Education**

Similar to the Ofsted report in the UK, the early childhood curricula in the United States is making rapid changes from learning through play to following more standard curricula (Miller & Almon, 2009). Compared to the previous curricula, the new standard curricula require children to spend more time on mathematical and literacy instruction instead of allowing children to learn these concepts through play.

Even with a movement toward direct academic instruction in the early years as indicated by the Ofsted report, there is still a shift toward the use of play-based learning in early education in various countries (i. e., China, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, United Arab Emirates) (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). Play-based learning understands that children learn while they play, both developmentally and academically (Danniels & Pyle, 2018).

Playing does not mean children are wasting time; at this young age, children predominately learn through play (Danniels & Pyle, 2018; Thomas, Warren, & deVries, 2011). Learning through play develops children's health, imagination, social-emotional competencies, language skills, and physical capacities. Moreover, children at this age are growing in all domains of development, especially their mental health. Through play, teachers are able to recognize and address any developmental or health problems that children may exhibit. When children engage in complex socio-dramatic play, they have the opportunity to develop their language and social skills, empathy, imagination, self-esteem, self-control, and higher levels of thinking.

Aljarrah (2017) describes Froebel's and Vygotsky's claim that play is a developmental tool in children's pre-school years, and creativity can be fostered effectively as an essential skill for life. According to Aljarrah, play is the children's business and their way of discovering the world.

Vygotsky (2004) states that play-based learning is necessary in early childhood in order to learn the new ideas and experiences about the world. Rich experiences are necessary for adequately informing imagination. Some researchers argue that this increased focus on direct instruction is developmentally inappropriate, because children are expected to learn academic content that may

be beyond their developmental level in a manner that does not actively engage students. Pyle and Danniels (2017) state that a teacher-directed focus is depriving children of stress-relieving play opportunities.

Through play, children also learn to read, write, and use math and science knowledge; young children learn with sensory activities and build the experiences that will help them in their lives. Research supports play as effective in establishing the curriculum such as reading, writing, science, and mathematics. Many existing studies demonstrate the role of play in each of these curricular areas. For example, James Christie for literacy (Christie, 1987, 1991; Roskos & Christie, 2000), Constance Kamii (1988, 2000) for mathematics, and Brian Stone (2016) for science. Christie (1987) found when children play out stories in dramatic play, it increases their story comprehension. In addition, when children use symbols in play (symbolic play), it provides them with the foundational ability they will need for future reading and writing (Stone & Burriss, 2016). Kamii (1988, 2000) understands how play helps children put things into relationships which is important for developing number sense. Stone (2016) says “playing around in science presents children with opportunities to think creatively and divergently, to solve problems in innovative ways, and to develop a unique scientific identity” (p. 6).

Crehan (2016) explains that starting formal schooling when the children are a little older makes no lasting difference to children’s later reading ability. Children need the opportunities to develop their basic knowledge gradually through rich activities, and therefore, depend on learning through playing. Encouraging children to learn pre-reading and pre-math skills through play helps them develop their cognitive skills, preparing them for a new type of learning, which is an effective and reliable practice. Children need to develop their individual confidence levels and understand their abilities, which they cannot achieve without playing with peers and manipulating a variety of materials.

Besides providing important foundations for academic learning, play elicits imagination which draws on elements of reality (Diachenko, 2011; Vygotsky, 2004). Personality development is also important in children, ages four to five, because children develop the essential foundations in their early years for their future beliefs and knowledge. Furthermore, preschool years remain foundational for children to positively shape their personality, habits, skills, and basic knowledge (Kazu & İş, 2018; Tarman & Tarman, 2011). Children who develop positive self-images will become well prepared for school and life. Toward supporting well-being and self-confidence, play is important in helping children to develop later life skills such as social interaction and emotional competency.

Crehan (2016) describes the purpose of learning through play is to provide children with the opportunities to enjoy their learning. Preschool children, learning through play, assume ownership in the process, and demonstrate more confidence in their abilities and express joy while learning. Thus, play is an effective, developmentally appropriate, and holistic approach for educators to implement for young children’s learning.

Crehan (2016) understands the important nature of learning for young children, “because children don’t do formal learning at desks in preschool or kindergarten, they learn through

playing” (p. 15). Four- to five-year-old children are active and while learning, they are likely to move more instead of sitting and listening. Children understand the content more effectively with opportunities to participate in active learning through playing and interacting with peers. Children learn in everyday activities while engaging with peers and adults, sharing learning, negotiating, and building strong relationships (Fasoli, Wunungmurra, Ecenarro, & Fleet, 2010). Furthermore, teachers, during playtime, indirectly encourage children in reading, writing, and mathematics. Children are more likely to learn by listening, speaking, observing, and exploring during playtime than through direct instruction. Teachers focus on supporting the children’s learning by asking insightful questions and discussing their answers.

Choice play time is a rich time for children to learn reading, writing, and mathematics. Learning through play provides children at this age the opportunity to practice essential activities such as thinking, exploring, and investigating in a risk-free environment. These skills established through play will provide valuable life-long learning for children.

However, it remains critical for teachers to understand how to most appropriately prepare the environment for children’s quality play experiences. Kemple, Oh, and Porter (2015) emphasize the idea that using appropriate teaching strategies through play are fundamental in meeting children’s learning and development needs in their early years. Children can play at school, home and in other community settings. However, many children may face limitations in entering some of these play settings effectively; for example, over-structured curricula activities, lack of complex materials, and sparse peer interactions. Nothing can compare with the holistic, authentic, and risk-free experience of learning through play.

Playing at school is important because at school, children have access to materials and to their peers as playmates. Furthermore, Miller and Almon (2009) describe how Finland’s children go to a playful early childhood setting before entering first grade at age seven. They found that the experience of learning through play did not negatively affect Finish children’s learning outcomes in the long-term. In fact, children in Finland receive the highest scores on the Program International Student Assessment [PISA], which is an international exam for 15-year-olds.

The epistemology in children’s play, learning, and development is that young children grow quickly, and as they adapt, play experiences provide a natural and developmentally appropriate pathway for authentic learning. The more children interact with one another, the more learning experiences will occur. Learning through play and hands-on activities will remain important teaching methods in early childhood.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations support children learning through play:

1. Use block centers to provide opportunities for children to explore mathematics and science. For example, counting, colors, sorting, patterns, size, balance, and comparisons.
2. Through dramatic play, children rehearse and explore language skills in a risk-free experience. For example, ask children to role play and act out characters from a familiar

story, invite children to write a script and identify characters they wish to represent, or provide children with relevant props in the family living and block centers.

3. Include a variety of different writing and drawing materials in the family living, block and art centers.
4. Pay attention to children's representations. Request and invite they display their products. It is important children gain their own internal sense of competence and not rely on an external evaluation. Children practice/rehearse for themselves and not for the teacher's approval.
5. Provide opportunities for individual, small and large group play events.
6. Ensure outdoor and nature play for exploring science and mathematics.

### **Conclusion**

Children naturally play during most of their time in or out of the school. Play is the center of children's lives and also one of the most common ways of enjoying and exploring life. Children benefit from playing in many ways; they develop their language, self-regulation, social-emotional skills, problem-solving skills, interact with others, and discover the world (Dinnerstein, 2016). Teachers can support children's learning and stimulate their attention to learn from play by asking children to observe, record, ask, explore, confer, and participate. Additionally, children who experience play-based learning/inquiry in the early childhood years, become more likely to sustain a higher level of engagement and motivation in later more formal learning experiences.

When we challenge children to solve complex problems through play, they will benefit from these experiences, thus, these learning experiences by play will assist children to be prepared for future academic learning. Using play to facilitate children's needs is a more effective way for teachers to meet children's naturally occurring stages of development than direct academic instruction. In order to support children successfully, it is essential to provide teachers with various ways to use play for optimal learning as well as train pre-service teachers on mastering these approaches to achieve effective learning through play.

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