

Play in the Primary School Classroom? The Experience of Teachers Supporting Children's Learning through a New Pedagogy

Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis (2011)

Overview

The play-based pedagogy in Scotland is also known as Active Learning. This research aims to explore the movement toward creating an active play-based learning environment. The two essential pieces of information being looked at are the children's experiences in a play-based active learning environment in school and their teachers' perspectives on this pedagogical innovation and their roles in supporting the learners. The study suggests that the role of the teacher varies between what could be considered as teacher-intensive and teacher-initiated activities.

Theoretical Frame

The initiative to move towards a more active learning approach has been supported by the research indicating that play develops children's content knowledge across the curriculum and enhances the development of social skills, competences and dispositions to learn. A play-based approach is considered an integral element of high-quality provision for young children and the amount of time a teacher allocates to play gives a 'message' concerning its importance and value. The literature pertaining to active learning approaches proposes that the role of the teacher in supporting children's engagement with learning is critically important.

The Classroom Environment and Structure

All classrooms were organized to support play-based learning. The routines were also similar, with a period of whole-class activity with the teacher dealing with routine administration, phonics and number work followed by periods of play-based activities in small groups.

Findings

Teacher views on the benefits of active learning

All teachers were positive about the encouragement of active play-based learning, believing that active learning promoted a positive, enthusiastic attitude to learning and encouraged independence and confidence in children. It was also seen as a very inclusive method of learning, giving all children, no matter their ability, the opportunity to learn. The teachers also felt that the children were more engaged in learning, learned at a faster rate, and were encouraged to collaborate and integrate as a group.

Teacher views on the challenges of active learning

Gathering evidence of children's learning appeared to be the biggest concern among teachers. By moving away from the workbook and worksheet teachers found it challenged to properly assess the children's learning. Teachers had, however, developed other methods and sources to evaluate learning, one example being children's journals. Teachers also noted a challenge in adjusting their thinking about the way in which the classroom was organized, and the way the day and activities were structured.

Observations of active learning in class

Two classroom types were observed: traditional approach and an active learning/play-based approach. In the traditional approach the children were engaged in many actions, including listening; looking; chanting responses; giving answers; counting, adding; measuring; making number stories; identifying words, letters, sounds and rhymes; rehearsing tasks/skills; responding to behavior rules; using the interactive Smartboard; assembling; tidying; waiting; and demonstrating disengagement. In the second classroom type, the play-based/active learning, observers noticed the children giving answers; negotiating roles with others; ordering words or numbers; copying patterns and drawing pictures; listening to stories and songs; using the computer or Smartboard; practice reading; did jigsaw puzzles; building with construction materials; measuring, counting, and adding up; lining up, clearing up, moving around. More signs of disengagement were observed in the traditional learning environment.

Discussion

The play-based active learning curriculum has been met with enthusiasm in Scotland; however, the understanding of this pedagogy has differed among educators. The reason many are finding a shift to this new pedagogy challenging is due to the fact that many teachers find it difficult to create an appropriate learning context that allows them to follow children's interests and build upon prior knowledge. A 'negotiated classroom' is suggested, which places a great deal of importance on the teacher planning for a range of tasks, both teacher-initiated and child-initiated, and of children being free to move on to the next task when they have successfully completed the previous one.

Conclusion

The research proposes that there are different understandings of the purposes and benefits of the active learning approach. It is also believed that the shift from more traditional school pedagogy, concerned with objectives and outcomes, to a pedagogy based on the responsive, interactive nursery ethos is one that requires additional resources and training to support the demands placed upon teachers.