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Rediscovering the Garden in Kindergarten: Towards a Holistic Approach

Abstract

Dress-up clothes, wooden blocks, and art easels are seemingly collecting dust in the back closets of many of today's kindergarten classrooms. Where once creativity, imagination, and exploration were vividly expressed during times of free play, the youngest of students in many of today's education system are trading in their toys for textbooks. This was not the vision of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the German philosopher who provided the foundation and validity of play as a vehicle for learning within the establishment of the kindergarten movement. The 21st century kindergarten has evolved from nurturing the child's sense of play towards a stronger focus upon learning outcomes. It is necessary for the Christian educator to examine this paradigm shift in the kindergarten movement with biblical discernment to develop a holistic balance that ensures that each of today's youngest students are provided necessary and developmentally appropriate opportunities and skills to further their calling within His world.

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Towards a Holistic Approach

by

Beth R. Bleeker

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Thesis
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Rediscovering the Garden in Kindergarten: Towards a Holistic Approach

by

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Abstract

Dress-up clothes, wooden blocks, and art easels are seemingly collecting dust in the back closets of many of today's kindergarten classrooms. Where once creativity, imagination, and exploration were vividly expressed during times of free play, the youngest of students in many of today's education system are trading in their toys for textbooks. This was not the vision of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the German philosopher who provided the foundation and validity of play as a vehicle for learning within the establishment of the kindergarten movement. The 21st century kindergarten has evolved from nurturing the child's sense of play towards a stronger focus upon learning outcomes. It is necessary for the Christian educator to examine this paradigm shift in the kindergarten movement with biblical discernment to develop a holistic balance that ensures that each of today's youngest students are provided necessary and developmentally appropriate opportunities and skills to further their calling within His world.

Through his visionary educational beliefs about young children learning within the context of their environment, Freidrich Froebel (1782-1852) founded the kindergarten movement in Germany during the early 18th century. Froebel centered the design of his kindergarten upon the basis of “incorporating the concept of structured/guided play... to both help them [students] prepare and protect them from the regimentation they would soon face in school” (Manning, 2005, p. 372). Froebel argued that learning through play was to be considered a primary agent in the construction of understanding and meaning for young children.

However, Froebel was not the first to consider a learner-centered education for young children. His theories were largely influenced by earlier works by philosophers such as Jacques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) views of the concept of nature and the nurturing of children, as well as his tutor, John Pestalozzi’s (1746-1827) views of constructing meaning through doing.

Since Froebel’s initial theoretical views, play has taken on many different facets, especially in relation toward what children play with, whom they are engaged with, and what environmental setting is established. Regardless of the nature of play, Manning’s (2005) definition remains true: “... [play is] the methodology by which the child works to achieve inner harmony and develops the knowledge and skills he will need to grow as a human being (p. 373). However, in context to the 21st century kindergarten, play is becoming an ever-diminishing comfort: “...play is considered a frill or add-on that has no place in the academic setting” (Riley & Jones, 2010).

Consequently, kindergarten students are caught within an intertwined bed of historical annotations and present-day demands regarding how they should experience

learning within their first formal school experience. “[Our students] have more formal schooling but less time to explore, practice social skills, or build relationships with peers and adults. The expectations they face are steep, pitched at what was once seen as first grade”(Graue, 2010, p. 30).

Problem

The historical connotations for active learning within an experienced-based classroom environment have been well researched. For more than 15 decades, philosophers and scholars have studied the importance of play upon the whole child developing within the academic realm of society, providing various theories and definitions to be considered. Each theory, from classical to modern composition, has influenced early childhood education and the capacity to which it is integrated into each teacher’s style and conduct of his/her classroom. Yet, the required time spent upon kindergarten curricular demands in response to the 21st century standards-based movement, especially within literacy and math skills, has firmly pushed play to the edges.

Christian educators must acknowledge this shifting paradigm within the kindergarten movement and develop a response that provides a fundamentally and developmentally appropriate, Christ-centered approach towards kindergarten in a 21st century standards-based movement currently established today.

Research Questions

Recognizing the importance of the physical, social, emotional, and mental domains of young children, The National Association of Education of Young Children (NAEYC) was founded in 1926 and continues to be the largest worldwide organization working on behalf of children from birth to age eight, setting standards of excellence for

programs and teachers within early childhood classrooms. The NAEYC's founding principles are rooted upon several prominent theorists' views towards intellectual development from a constructivist, interactive perspective endorsed by Dewey (1916), Piaget (1952), Vygotsky (1978), Gardner (1991), and Kamili and Ewing (1996). The value that social and physical interaction within one's environmental surroundings has upon the learner deepening his/her understanding of that environment and providing such experiences is an invaluable tool for today's kindergarten teacher. However, much focus with 21st century classrooms is being placed upon academic excellence and achievement at any cost, including the diminishing effects of recess and creative, free play.

For the purpose of this study, the scope will be narrowed to an understanding of the historical context and timeline of the kindergarten movement, coupled with an examination of the implications of paradigm shifts within kindergarten, and an analysis of an appropriate Christian approach towards the education of our school's youngest students. The following research questions will be addressed:

- What key figures and ideas influenced kindergarten education from its beginning in the early 1800's until the 21st century?
- What are the implications of the paradigm shift in kindergarten education?
- What is an appropriate Christian response to the contrasting paradigms of kindergarten education?

Definitions

To ensure that clear and concise communication is achieved, it is crucial that the meanings of terms be evaluated. The following definitions are the researcher's unless otherwise indicated.

Active learning can be defined as engaging some and/or all the senses in various modes of activity that pursue the development of fundamental skills and abilities.

Child-centered education can be defined as a period in childhood [in which] the child is placed in the center of all things, and all things are seen only in relation to himself, to his life (Froebel, 1889).

Constructivism can be defined as a learner-centered educational theory that contends that to learn anything, each learner must construct his or her own understanding by tying new information to prior experiences (Henson-Dean, 2003).

Developmentally appropriate is the acquired knowledge of the universal, predictable stages of growth observed in normally developing children used as a framework for guiding learning environments and instructional experiences.

Dramatic play can be defined as pretending to take on adult roles and tasks (Saracho, & Spodek, 1995).

Early childhood education is the instruction of young children within a formal or informal setting.

Iowa Core Curriculum (ICC) provides academic expectations and standards for all Iowa's K-12 students in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and 21st century learning.

The National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the world's largest educational organization working on the behalf of young children from birth to age eight.

Free play can be defined as practice within choosing, doing, and problem solving through thinking, innovating, negotiating, all while taking risks at one's own will (Jones, 2004).

Progressivism can be defined as the educational movement in the late nineteenth century from traditional curriculum to a learner-centered modality of gaining knowledge through experiences.

Standards-based can be defined as a collective of initiatives at the state level used to define what students at each grade level should comprehend and/or perform (Lefkowitz & Miller, 2006).

Zone of proximal development is the range of abilities that one can perform with assistance, but not yet perform independently.

Literature Review

Historical Timeline and Analysis

The conceptual roots of the early childhood education movement within America can be traced to 18th century Swiss philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) published collection of thoughts, *Emile* (1762). Through this idealized description of education, Rousseau advocated the natural development of young children within their surroundings, prolonging and protecting their childhood from the pressures and conformities of adulthood (Henson-Dean, 2003). Rousseau has been regarded as one of educational history's greatest contradictions, as he gave away each of his children at birth, yet his work was a stepping stone in transforming the societal view and treatment of children (Beatty, 1995).

Though some of Rousseau's pedagogical ideas were extreme and impractical to implement, they were enormously influential on the European Revolution of "New Education." Before the writings of Rousseau, education had been dominated by the "Old Custom" approach towards learning, reinforced through corporal punishment and authoritative control (Willis, 2009). Children were viewed merely as miniature adults, forced into arduous and often dangerous working conditions after only a few years of educational training. Rousseau recognized such treatment of children as highly unnatural and damaging to their mental and physical development.

Through his work, *Emile*, Rousseau countered this view of children as objects to be managed by adults with the perspective of developing their natural individuality in an environment where "...they should be free from unnatural restraint...and should be allowed to develop...without restriction" (Willis, 2009, p. 20).

Influenced by the works of Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) expanded upon his philosophy towards the education of young children and designed a learner-centered school curriculum in Yverdon, Switzerland in 1805. Pestalozzi believed true education should encapsulate the whole child in a way that simulates nature. Thus, the metaphor of children as plants being nourished as they learned by doing within a natural, free environment was adopted into philosophical thinking (Henson-Dean, 2003).

Pestalozzi's view of the teacher also transpired the societal perspective towards education. Whereas before the teacher was an authoritative, dominating figure, Pestalozzi believed teachers must develop an atmosphere of nurturing love and respect, all while allowing children to learn through activity and play. Thus, "...children would rely more on discovering for themselves and less on others" (Willis, 2009, p. 21).

From Pestalozzi's foundational metaphor of the natural curiosity of children as thirsty plants ready to be nourished, German philosopher Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) founded the concept of kindergarten, which when translated means *child's garden*. Froebel continued this view of nature describing the teacher's role as one of care and nurture towards the children in a way that allows each one's inner strength and qualities to unfold and bloom, thus reaching their fullest potential.

This theoretical perspective towards children was largely impacted through Froebel's religious beliefs. Froebel placed God at the very core of the universe as well as the core of education. Thus, his ultimate goal for education was for children to develop knowledge of and a relationship with God through interacting within their natural environment (Reed & Prevost, 1993). In order to create this type of unity with God, Froebel argued that the developmentally-appropriate play children engage in is the purest

form of self-expression in achieving oneness with the Lord: "...he wanted the child to learn to appreciate God through observation, reflection, and activity...not through dogmatic religious teaching" (Ross, 1976, p. 4).

For Froebel, the natural development of play also allowed for growth in motor and self-expressions, creativeness, and social participation. By instilling such a methodology of learning through play, Froebel's end goal for each child was to be led by the joy one felt while learning and to apply it towards remaining school activities, thus developing a lifelong love of learning and discovery of God's creation (Ross, 1976). Although a complete return towards the inclusion of Froebel's pedagogy is not possible for today's 21st century kindergarten classrooms, his revolutionary theory in understanding that each child is creative and productive when granted the opportunity to conceptualize and interact with one's surroundings is Froebel's truest gift towards viewing each child as a learner.

It was through one of the earliest and most active American kindergarten pioneers, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, that Froebel's ideas were gradually introduced in America in 1860. Although she had been teaching for quite some time, Peabody traveled to Germany to visit an authentic Froebelian kindergarten classroom. It was during her time in Germany that Peabody recognized the importance of a more play-centered approach towards learning versus the intellectual teaching methods she previously held (Ross, 1976). Peabody returned to America and began spreading the word regarding the playing, learning child, through public lectures and printed articles within her journal publication, *The Kindergarten Messenger*. Peabody's message was a simple one in which she dwelt upon Froebelian concepts such as discovering the spirit of God within each

child; religious nurture rather than religious dogma; respect for the child as an individual, cultivating children's [minds] rather than drilling them, the natural curiosity of children during games, and high standards in training kindergarten teachers, even when a crucial shortage of teachers existed in the early years of the movement (Ross, 1976).

After Peabody's death in 1894, the Froebelian crusade also died, and was substituted with a change in focus "...from the state of children's souls to the state of their bodies, minds, and daily lives" (Beatty, 1995, p. 71). This shift occurred largely in response towards a changing perspective of children and their place within society due to the growth of the Industrial Revolution and urbanization that occurred within America after the Civil War. Proponents of the more traditional classroom considered play to be frivolous as they viewed children as mere adults needing preparation for a life of intellectual work and success, leaving no room or time for play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

Nevertheless, Rousseau's, Pestalozzi's and Froebel's basic tenets towards a child-centered education system, the significance of play, and the idea of the classroom as a social community, were not forgotten. John Dewey (1859-1952), who would later be remembered as "the father of Progressive education," was arguably the most influential proponent during the 20th century of educating the "whole child," wherein learning at its best focuses upon the needs and interests of the child. Dewey transformed the formalities of the Froebelian kindergarten which had categorized play into instructional routines and opted for more of a "free" environment that embraced learning as both problem-based and fun (Henson-Dean, 2003). It wasn't until Dewey and his work during the Progressivism Era of educational reform that America chose to adopt play as the work of

children: "...play reflected children's free and natural impulses... it was not to be considered frivolous [but] rather as an important part of early-childhood education" (Saracho & Spodek, 1995, p. 134).

Through her work with children with special needs, Maria Montessori (1870-1952) also recognized the value of building upon one's intelligence through providing real life learning experiences for the specific developmental needs of each child. Although these special needs children were casted off by society as uneducable, Montessori designed and manufactured materials that allowed "... children [with special needs] the ability to gather and organize their sensory impressions in order to better absorb knowledge...and gain life skills" (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Materials such as graduated blocks, rod and cylinders, and sandpaper letters and numbers were introduced as ways to engage the child and keep him/her focused on mastery of the skills needed in order to complete the task (Cossentino, 2006). Montessori's philosophy relied heavily upon the surrounding environment influencing and developing the whole child who led the learning.

As schools were being established for young children, concern was raised in response to the quality of the program and the professionalism of the employed individuals. Thus, the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) was established to in the 1920s and published its first book, *Minimum Essentials for Nursery Education*. From these initial works, the NAEYC continued to thrive in providing early childhood education programs with developmentally-appropriate curriculum and assessment standards, resources to improve program quality, and the

educating of families in the need for high quality early childhood learning experiences (*Early Learning Standards*, 2002).

The modern concept of play, especially dramatic play, as a valued and appropriate vehicle for learning and development in early childhood continued to permeate the Progressive Era. This new model of education continued to thrive until the Space Race in 1957, which caused many to blame the progressive, learner-centered education model of education for America falling behind Russia in aeronautical advances, thus calling for a return to a traditional, basic education (Henson-Dean, 2003).

Nevertheless, the value of play and the impact upon cognitive development within the early childhood classroom continued to be studied and impacted through the works of Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Vygotsky's and Piaget's work led toward constructivist education reform which viewed the learner as capable of acquiring new knowledge through connections made to prior experiences and interactions (Henson-Dean, 2003).

Piaget's insights towards the cognitive development of children opened a new window into the inner workings of their minds and how true maturation of learning occurs. Einstein called Piaget's discovery "so simple that only a genius could have thought of it" (Papert, 1999). Piaget's philosophy was rooted in the idea that children's thinking develops in set stages, allowing for new areas and capabilities to be expanded upon and discovered. These transitional periods occur around 18 months, 7 years and 11/12 years of age. In essence, Piaget believed children are not developmentally ready to understand certain realms of knowledge before reaching a certain age range.

In light of previously used metaphors by education philosophers, Piaget believed children are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge (as previous traditional pedagogical theory had it), but active participants in creating and testing their own understandings of their surroundings (Papert, 1999). Thus, the play of a child to Piaget allowed for children to reflect upon what they had already learned, and served as an agent in providing the framework for continued growth to be built upon (Peisach & Hardeman, 2001).

In contrast, Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1896-1934) viewed the essence of play as facilitating cognitive development by providing an opportunity for children to not only practice what they already know, but also to learn new things from their social interactions. Vandenberg (1986) remarked that “play not so much reflects thought (as Piaget suggests) as it creates thought” (p. 21).

Therefore, although fundamentally different in theory regarding the relationship between play and cognitive development, the impact Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s foundational philosophies towards the value of play within early childhood education has furthered the understanding between their important link: “...play is ...not simply frivolous but an intensely absorbing activity that serves as a powerful matrix for learning and development” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 2).

With a continued push to increase student achievement after the dramatic decline in success rates in the 1960s, the 1983 Reagan-era publication, *A Nation at Risk*, was released. The publication detailed the continued decline in graduation rates and the demand for a standards-based movement to equalize the educational opportunities and outcomes of each student. As a result, a federal government program, *The Goals 2000*:

Educate America Act of 1993, gave federal grants to state education departments to develop state curriculum standards (McClure, 2005). Subsequently, national professional subject-matter organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics were created within core subject areas. These organizations focused on creating standards for what children should learn, retain, and produce. Thus, "...curriculum standards [or what became known as content standards] were the basic building blocks of a systemic reform effort, known as the standards movement" (McClure, 2005, p. 7). Content and performance-based standards were created at each grade level, alongside assessment standards, which measured student performance on each standard required. This new way of assessing what had been taught and what students had learned was drastically different from the norm-referenced tests previously used.

Although this first wave of reforming America's education policies did not have much of an effect in creating standards to improve education at a national level (Scherer, 2001), it gave direction regarding what American students should be learning within different subject areas and placed focus more upon individual state standards versus federal mandates. In 2009, the Common Core State Standards Initiative was birthed as a state-led effort established to provide a shared set of educational standards for English language arts and mathematics for grades K-12 ("Common Core State Standards Initiative," 2010). Although each state has developed its own process for developing, adopting, and implementing standards, all standards were created by the best available evidence and practices for instruction by education experts, parents and school administrators and a diverse group of teachers who serve on National Council committees. Through their efforts, "...a common first step was made toward ensuring our

children are getting the best possible education no matter where they live” (“Common Core State Standards Initiative,” 2010). Just as it is up to each individual state to adopt the standards, the same flexibility is provided in relation toward assessment of these standards.

At the beginning of the shift to the standards movement, kindergarten education felt little impact. However, in recent years, there has been an increased awareness of the importance of early childhood education, and an expanded involvement within public and private educational institutions for 3- and 4-year-olds, which has motivated an application of the standards-based movement into early education. More specifically, within the state of Iowa, legislation passed the newest wave of education reform, the Iowa Core Curriculum.

Within the Iowa Core Curriculum (ICC), a guideline is provided for all school districts and accredited nonpublic schools regarding standards and benchmarks to be reached at each grade level, providing challenging and meaningful content from kindergarten to 12th grade within literacy, math, science, social studies, and 21st century skills. It also includes direction for teachers regarding effective instruction and assessment. Through these standards, the goal of the ICC is “... to take learning to a deeper level by moving students beyond superficial knowledge to deep conceptual and procedural knowledge [by] enhancing student engagement by emphasizing interesting, robust, and relevant learning experiences” (“Iowa Core Curriculum,” 2010). Full implementation to the Iowa Core in grades 9-12 must occur by July 1, 2012 and grades K-8 by 2014-2015.

The Iowa Core Curriculum Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to perform, not how teachers should teach. “For instance, the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations” (“Iowa Core Literacy,” 2011, p. 6) Therefore, the standards only focus on what is most essential for continued success, and the discretion in guiding his/her students towards competency is left to the individual classroom teacher.

Foundational Truths

The historical timeline of education reform mirrors that of a swinging pendulum, swaying back and forth in the best implementation method for all children to learn, create, and grow. Whereas kindergarten was once a place of exploration and discovery through social experiences and active play, it is now being replaced with the rigors and demands of academic content standards and benchmarks, which were previously held for the primary grades. However, the Bible has remained a constant source of truths and guidance for Christ’s people to center their lives upon. Christian teachers must examine these biblical virtues as they create the foundational basis for their understanding of and actions in each classroom and must shape their own understanding of the purpose for Christian education.

Proverbs 9:10 states, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” As students grow in the knowledge of God’s creation, each new discovery should lead them to acknowledge that no part of life can ever be separated from God’s sovereignty and dominion over all. Second, the children served by such a distinct perspective must be viewed with regard of their

Creator- each uniquely formed in His image with a purpose of eagerly seeking and doing His will all the days of their lives. Third, such a love needs to be revealed by guiding each child to become responsible, responsive disciples of Jesus Christ, sharing His love to all those around them.

The sovereignty of God. The Bible reveals God as the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, and no part of life stands apart from the all-encompassing will of God (Psalm 24:1). Van Brummelen (2009) expanded upon this biblical truth as a cornerstone of the purpose of Christian education, revealing a major aim of Christian teaching and learning is "...to discover God's laws and apply them in obedient response to Him" (p. 13). Therefore, each area of curricular study is directed towards the source of all knowledge as revealed in Psalm 111:10, "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." From this foundation, distinct Christian education must be dedicated to the glory of God above all else as it filters everything through a biblical perspective.

The curriculum, then, considers the Lord's providential plan for His world, revealing an orderly and diverse God along each new chapter of study. Through this curricular exploration, Van Dyk (1985) explained how students will become aware of God's divinely ordained world. "The Lord did not create a chaotic, disjointed world...even after man's fall into sin with its distorting and fragmenting effects, [God] continues to display astounding coherence and harmony" (p. 5). Through using the Bible as the lens from which all perspective is gained, students will be led deeper in understanding God's wonderful creation and will be trained to follow Christ.

The reflection of God. A mirror has a simple yet pivotal purpose of reflecting the lighted image in its focus. Similarly, God's children are created in His image and called

to reflect His light, even through a sinful yet redeemed state (Ephesians 4:24). Graham (2008) stated that our being created in the image of God lends itself towards a reflection of the nature and character of God through the process of doing His work for Him, as stated in the Cultural Mandate (Genesis 1:28). Just as Adam was given the authority to name the animals and tend the garden, we are also given the authority to complete the tasks of God's work on earth in learning of His intricate world and seeking our purpose within it.

Graham (2008) provided a number of God's attributes that are central components in viewing the learner. The first of these attributes is that our God is active and purposeful. As described in Scripture, God created the ordered world and initiated action by calling us to be stewards of it. Although we were placed in charge of God's world, we often may not acknowledge God in the process. We do, however, act with purpose and intent.

Graham (2008) described God as the Triune God, working in harmonious union with the Son and Holy Spirit. However, God also desires fellowship with His creation, as is evident through His establishment of a covenant with us, as well as with each other: "...the characteristics and work of each human being are to find their expression in the context of shared experience with God and humankind" (p. 92). Graham (2008) stated the educational process must mirror this relationship among fellow learners, sharing in one's individual relationship with God to further relationships among each other, working in communal love and respect of differing talents and abilities.

Finally, Graham (2008) distinguished God as free and responsible, acting according to His own purposes and making choices to do as He will. Due to our finite

will, we are only able to make choices within the limitations of the nature given to us, but we do so in a way that allows us to make the choices and accept the responsibility for them. Graham (2008) viewed the learner as capable of making these choices and accepting responsibility/consequences for the resulted actions, just as God modeled for us so beautifully in beginning of the world: “Genesis 1 is a testimony to the idea that God chose to create the universe. He did not need to do so; He chose to do so” (p. 84).

However, apart from God’s intervention, all our actions are marred with sin and are distortions of their true purpose due to the fall of man. Graham (2008) signified the importance of viewing our students through the lens of their sinful nature, recognizing their estranged state and perversion of their reflected image, hopelessly misdirected and condemned: “We are no longer God-centered, God-serving, God-enjoying, or God-obeying, but rather we are self-centered, self-serving, self-enjoying, and self-obeying” (p. 100).

The love of God. Just as Christ’s disciples were followers of Him in every instance, both physically and spiritually applying the example set of their leader, Van Brummelen (2009) also viewed the purpose of education as intending for students to become fully committed to Christ in thought, word, and action, thus resulting in responsible, responsive kingdom builders. As Van Brummelen (2009) stated, there are at least three parts to this general aim: first, students learn to unfold the basic framework of a Christian vision of life; second, they learn about God’s world and how humans have responded to God’s mandate in caring for His creation; and third, they develop the responsibility to apply the concepts, abilities, and creative gifts that enable them to contribute positively towards God’s kingdom.

Unfortunately, as a result of sin, our nature serves as a roadblock in accomplishing these tasks. Only through the strength of the Holy Spirit are we made anew, making it possible to pursue these tasks in a manner that still pleases God. “Education must, then, be related to helping students perform those tasks in the power of God’s Spirit” (Graham, 2008, p. 57). Thankfully, God in His mercy did not end His story here, but sent a Redeemer to reconcile and reclaim His world, and promised His return to complete the full restoration of our sins. Thus, we have been given the duty of living in preparation for the fulfillment of His promise, and “...by living in accordance with that truth is a primary way in which we testify to the reality of God and show others who He is” (Graham, 2008, p.115). In doing so, Bruinsma (2003) argued the importance of viewing our students in this redemptive hope, recognizing they are not controlled by sin, passively taking in the information presented to them in the classroom, but are active, intentional subjects of their King, becoming equipped to participate in the restoring God’s creation.

While viewing the learner through the lens of the Bible is vital in pursuing the true purpose of learning and education, Graham (2008) established the importance of viewing the teacher in the same fashion, first through God the Father as the model. Graham (2008) signified that teachers must also actively take control of all learning situations and work towards a worthy, concise purpose, all while thinking creatively in establishing lesson plans and materials, and holding his/her students responsible for the learning that occurs.

Van Brummelen (2009) took the image-bearing responsibilities of teachers even further through biblically-informed metaphors, relating the classroom teacher to Christ

Jesus's life and actions on earth. Although many metaphorical comparisons could be expanded upon, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus upon Christ as Shepherd and how teachers are to emulate the provided characteristics as revealed in the Bible.

Hebrews 13:20 calls Jesus "that great Shepherd of the sheep." Just as a shepherd is constantly aware of his flock, lovingly guiding them with his staff in moving from one location to the next, God calls Christian teachers to guide youth with purpose and intent, providing the necessary knowledge and discernment that leads towards a service for God and others. However, such guidance requires structuring a classroom that enables students to take on their life's calling, as the teacher is also on the same journey of learning and growing alongside the student, rather than being viewed as the sole proprietor of knowledge and truth. Van Dyk (1987) described distinctively Christian teaching as "...discipleship rooted in hearing and doing the will of God...equipping students for service... and enabling them [students] to function as disciples in our complex world" (p. 38).

However, Graham (2008) declared the importance of teachers recognizing their similar, helpless state as their students, limited in their actions and thoughts due to sin. These limitations can be used as a model for our students in demonstrating the power of God's reconciling mercy, and guide our students towards recognizing our complete reliance upon Him for all our needs.

Discussion

Summary

Each generation imparts their value, culture, religion, traditions and skills to their young, ensuring they are trained for continued growth and goodness. However,

discerning what is best in relation to the education of the youngest of students has created a recent dichotomy in practice and product. What is the response of the Christian teacher in seeking a harmonious balance between current education standards in retrospect of the historical undergirding of kindergarten education?

Implications

It's basic scientific knowledge: a plant needs a balance of the appropriate amount of air, soil, water, and sunlight in order for it to reach its optimal purpose- strong, sturdy roots embedded deep into rich ground; a tall, upright stem; bountiful, outstretched leaves; and a blossom full of radiant color and fragrance, all developing in sequence of each other in order to share its beauty with buzzing insects and curious human noses. If a plant does not have an equalized balance of all things necessary for survival or is given too much of one or not enough of the other, its end result is obvious--an underdeveloped, wilted, and weak plant, which will likely die.

Metaphorically speaking, the same holds true for today's "garden of children." If an appropriate balance is not established between the academic expectations of the 21st century learning standards and the values and necessities of learning through play, our kindergarten students will not develop to their fullest potential. According to Graue (2010), the answer in seeking such a balance is in the creation of what she termed a "hybrid kindergarten" (p. 15).

The innovation of such a holistic approach towards kindergarten within the 21st century combines the early learning domains of social and emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative development, along with the 21st century academic domains within literacy, mathematics, and science. Epstein (2007) advocated for such a holistic modality towards

early childhood education. “Intentional teaching means teachers act with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children’s development and learning... in all domains... through a repertoire of instructional strategies and knowledge of when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways individual children learn...” (p. 1).

Nevertheless, the act of being an intentional Christian teacher holds even more purpose than just preparing the daily lesson plans to include a balance of appropriate instructional strategies. Van Brummelen (2002) recognized the importance of preparing learning experiences that recognize each student’s inherent dignity and worth, as planned according to their Creator who formed them uniquely in His image. “Classrooms must be places where students learn to bear each other’s burdens and share each other’s joys, and where they learn to work together for the common good” (Van Brummelen, 2002, p. 109). In doing so, effective learning will engage both the head and the heart, as modeled by Christ’s disciples and challenged upon us in the Cultural Mandate in Matthew 28:18-20. “A curriculum that plans for this type of learning will develop their insights and abilities in a context in which their unique gifts are recognized, their learning fosters a sense of awe and wonder, and engenders purposeful enthusiasm about the possibilities of God’s creation...made possible through the saving grace of Jesus Christ” (Van Brummelen, 2002, p. 129).

The first step in seeking a holistically-balanced kindergarten program that intertwines the historic foundations of play and today’s academic domains is an apportioned time between whole-group, small-group and independent activities with flexibility within teacher-directed lessons and student choice. According to Epstein (2007), “an effective early childhood program combines both child-guided and adult-

guided educational experiences" (p. 3). Children have significant, active roles in adult-guided experiences, and adults play intentional roles in child-guided experiences, taking advantage of both planned and unexpected learning opportunities.

However, this is not an exact process as each classroom and learning environment is unique. Yet, it is useful for teachers to consider when and how to support a child's own discovery and construction of knowledge, and when and how to convey content in teacher-guided activities and instruction. Epstein (2007) provided a holistic list of best practices based in child development theory and educational research to support balanced teaching within curriculum planning, classroom environment, scheduling, interacting with children, building relationships with families and assessing children's development. For sake of clarity and focus, I will be expanding upon the best practices within the curricular areas of literacy and math.

Literacy. According to the joint position statement of the International Reading Association and NAEYC (1998), the ability to read and write does not develop naturally, without careful planning and instruction. Furthermore, the development of literacy skills such as reading and writing is a continuum of sorts, beginning with a child's first interactions with print and progressing towards proficiency in reading and writing (Bruinsma, 2003) Therefore, in order for effective instruction and learning to occur within literacy development, Epstein (2007) suggested seeking a balance between child-guided and adult-guided experiences to best fit each required learning standard.

Seeking a balanced literacy program is also suggested by Mandel Morrow and Gambrell (2011), who proposed the implementation of a comprehensive literacy instruction program. Such a program encompasses seeking purpose and meaning in all

activities while incorporating evidenced-based best practices that suit the needs of all students in whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction. In addition, it offers opportunities for students to apply literacy strategies in the context of meaningful tasks for real-world purposes, thus, preparing them for their future life of reading and writing with joy, purpose, ease, and competence. “This instruction should prepare our students to enter adulthood with the skills they will need to participate fully in a democratic society that is part of a global economy” (Mandel Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, p. 18).

To ensure each of my students’ learning needs are being met, supported and/or challenged, I have implemented literacy work stations into my teaching pedagogy. Jensen (1998) suggested that to increase students’ intrinsic motivation and keep their attention, teachers should provide choices, make learning relevant and personal, and make it engaging (emotional, energetic, physical). These factors have led me to develop work stations in which the students are grouped heterogeneously according to ability level and rotate through three different stations a day with twenty minutes at each station, using instructional materials to explore and expand upon their literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and working with letters and words, often without assistance of the classroom teacher.

Through incorporating literacy work stations into my students’ daily routine, each student gets to participate at a level that is appropriate for his/her learning, allowing for differentiated learning to occur across the classroom population. In addition, student behavior is improved due to a result in hands-on activities requiring focus and commitment in completing an end result. Finally, students at literacy work stations internalize what is taught because they have a direct opportunity to practice a task just as

the teacher modeled it, resulting in learning how to be more independent and responsible (Diller, 2003).

This balanced approach towards reaching national and state content standards while incorporating the essence of play in a fashion that provides much more than just head knowledge, guides my students in acquiring solid social skills, a sense of self-worth and dignity, and confidence in accomplishing required tasks which serve as a strong foundation for future learning. Katz (2007) suggested not only focusing upon content standards, but on the standards of experience that benefit each child through such things as helping other discover things and understand them better, engaging in intellectually challenged materials, applying their developing literacy and numeracy skills in purposeful ways, as well as provide them with a feeling that they belong to a group of their peers.

The true purpose of seeking a holistically balanced language arts program within a Christian school environment is to ensure a responsible, responsive use of such skills through "...a reflection of an internalized commitment to language as a gift from God to be used for shared service and personal delight" (Bruinsma, 2003, p. 51). Human language is a unique gift from God, provided for His people to be used in service towards Him, our neighbor, and ourselves. Thus, the language arts curriculum of a Christian school must be centered upon fostering students' awareness of their calling to love God with their whole being and their neighbors as themselves as detailed in Matthew 22:37-39: "Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

My students then, are challenged daily to communicate in love and respect toward one another, thus building upon not only appropriate conversational skills but also building each other up in Christian love (1 Thessalonians 5:11). This is often expressed during our whole group reading time and journal sharing time in which the students are challenged to use descriptive language to explain and explore the chosen text. We spend time thinking of text connections, story elements and character examinations. We then connect what was discovered to God's world, thus expanding upon their oral vocabulary in describing the majesty and power of His intricate world, all while complimenting the author's work, whether it be a published item or a student's writing piece.

Helping children along the road to becoming successful readers and writers also includes mastery of letter sounds, rhyming words, and successful recognition of high frequency words within text. During our literacy work station time, my students are engaged in a wide array of differentiated learning activities that build upon these skills, all while incorporating the essence of play. I have created numerous games and activities that integrate structured learning through the flexibility of playing while learning. So often the students do not even realize they are building upon their literacy skills as they are engrossed within the actual play of the game! Even more so, each student is building upon their God-given talents and abilities.

Mathematics. Children are inquisitive by nature, investigating and observing the happenings of their surroundings within the world. Epstein (2007) contended that the goal of early mathematics education, then, is to build upon their natural curiosity through developing a rich environment for inquiry in order to transform their child-guided math play into an awareness of concepts and skills required for continued success. Free

exploration with materials is important, but Epstein (2007) warned is not enough: “...teachers need to consider whether children’s thinking is developing or stalled... when it’s developing, they can continue observing. When it is stalled, it is important for adult-guided experiences to intervene” (p. 45).

Since young children are concrete, hands-on learners, they need to manipulate materials in order to construct ideas about the physical world around them. Epstein (2007) provided a holistic list of best practices to incorporate into the kindergarten math curriculum in order to expand upon their meaningful learning. First, sufficient time and space must be allowed for exploration and manipulation, as “...the way children use objects are often very different from those that we intend or define” (Seo, 2003, p. 30). In addition, the teacher must model, challenge, and coach the children by demonstrating hands-on activities that the children can imitate and/or modify. Epstein (2007) took this even further by ensuring the teacher is asking questions, discussing what does (not) work, and suggesting alternative approaches to finding solutions, as these all promote higher level thinking and classifying skills.

As noted above, children can sometimes explain mathematical ideas to their peers/teachers in different thinking patterns than expected. Epstein (2007) suggested the importance of encouraging peer interaction through playing games, either invented for or by the children. Thus, the task has more meaning and purpose for the child invested in the activity: “beginning with a worthwhile task, one that is interesting, often complex, creates a real need to learn or practice” (Baroody, 2000, p. 64).

Through these more meaningful learning activities, a higher purpose and realization is also being created within each student, leading them to the understanding

that God is the Creator and Designer of all intricate details of the world. Van Brummelem (2009) detailed it best: “a biblical view of knowledge affirms God’s revelation and providence, and it embraces human response, commitment, and service as integral elements” (p. 93). By creating this awakening within each child, they will be able to see their learning not categorized into subject matters, but all linked together towards the power and majesty of our Triune God.

In order for my students to gain independence, knowledge, and confidence in their math skills, I have also incorporated Math work stations into my teaching pedagogy. Math work stations are areas within my classroom where students work alone, with a partner, or in a small group and use instructional materials to explore and expand upon their mathematic skills. During this time, a variety of activities are provided to reinforce and/or extend prior instruction, including such skills as reasoning, representing, communicating, higher level thinking, and problem solving. “By intentionally planning engaging experiences, children are not only learning math throughout the day that meet content standards.... but also learning to acquire process standards to support their problem solving, reasoning, and communication skills” (Jacobs & Crowley, 2010, p. 79).

Even more so than content and process standards being met, through hands-on exploration of math materials and concepts, my students are developing an awareness of and appreciation for the intricate world God formed. “The study of mathematics brings out a sense of awe and wonder in the design of God’s creation, as well as pointing to the faithfulness, immanence, and transcendence of God” (Van Brummelen, 2002, p. 202). Through this, the small seed of faith is planted into the hearts and minds of each of my

students, and with the proper guidance and support, can blossom into who God intended for them to be.

Limitations

The presented literature review was created within the context of private, Christian education within midwest America. Thus, the transferability of and modifying variables may not apply to one's kindergarten classroom based upon differing demographics. Furthermore, this researcher is a member of Sioux Center Christian School of Sioux Center, Iowa, and therefore cannot claim immunity towards the kindergarten program at SCCS.

This study is also limited by the amount of research available on creating a holistically balanced kindergarten classroom within the realms of learning standards and the play as a vehicle for learning. Although research has been gathered from a wide range of sources upon the value of play, research available on balancing both learning paradigms is virtually non-existent.

Further research on this topic might include a quantitative or qualitative analysis of several kindergarten programs within private schools across the United States to determine the extent of which form of learning activities are provided at each school. Based upon the findings, specific recommendations could be provided regarding how to formulate a balanced holistic approach towards kindergarten.

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