**Play-based learning**

Play is what children do for a living. Through play, they explore and make sense of their world. They interact with others and with their environment. They learn to make plans, focus on tasks, take turns, solve problems, and express ideas. They communicate, collaborate, and connect with their peers. Play is probably the only activity during which children control their own environment. NAEYP (, 2009) has identified the importance of play as one of the critical principles affecting child development and learning.

Play is a complex set of behaviors that seems to defy definition and explanation (Prior & Gerard, 2004). For most of us, play is simply any activity that is fun, pleasurable, enjoyable. But in the child's world, play is much more than that. It is generally agreed that important cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and physical skills are developed through children's play (Owocki, 1999). Creative play encourages self-expression by enabling children to interact with their environment to manipulate objects and construct creations that express their ideas, developing both gross and fine motor skills as well as divergent thinking. Physical play contributes to health and development by burning energy and building muscle strength. The fantasy and role-playing activities of imaginative play generate self-expression, abstract thinking, and social skills. All contribute to the development of self-regulation.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) theorized that imaginative play develops symbolic, abstract thought, an important precursor to reading. For example, when children begin to use one
During play-based learning, the teacher's role is to first observe and then guide, participating in the play and intervening as appropriate to extend children's thinking or enrich their talk. Leslie Morrow (1997) found that children are more likely to engage in literacy activities.
during play when teachers model integrating artifacts such as books, writing tools, and signs into the play. During play-based learning, the teacher's role is to first to observe and then to guide, participating in the play and intervening as appropriate to extend children's thinking or enrich their talk. A good rule of thumb is for teachers to observe for three minutes before entering into the play.

Play-based learning in today's kindergarten is not simply a return to the diversions of old where learning was incidental and the teacher little more than a babysitter. It is carefully balanced with explicit and purposeful instruction and practice in essential skills and new learning. As NAEYC (2009) suggests, it shouldn't have to be an “either-or” but “and-and.” Explicit instruction and practice can co-exist quite peacefully with unstructured play in the kindergarten program. We can – and should - integrate literacy behaviors into independent play, by incorporating literacy artifacts such as print materials and writing tools. In literacy-rich classrooms, it is an expectation that children will record their learning, such as Michael's writing above: "Me and Morgan made a police station." The teacher is constantly observing, teaching, supporting and collaborating to ensure that students are developing both knowledge and self-regulation.

We can also learn from the principles of play to make our instruction more engaging, interesting, interactive, and rewarding for our students by introducing games to play with words and sounds. We need more gross-motor movement, especially for our boys. We can consider ways to make our teaching more process-oriented, rather than product-
oriented, with activities that generate success and confidence while stretching our students to higher levels of proficiency.

**Play as Inquiry or Exploration**

In one classroom I visited recently, the students and teachers do not refer to "centers" or "play" but to "explorations." The children use "tools and materials" rather than "toys" to conduct their explorations. This is real work as they plan, construct, evaluate and engage. Before exploration time, the children take time to plan how they are going to use their time and at the end of the day, they gather again to reflect on what they accomplished. This planning and reflection might be done orally in partners, or it might be done individually on planning sheets such as Figure xx.

Joan Youngquist and Jann Pataray-Ching (2004) use the term "inquiry" to distinguish between the kind of play that children do outside of school and the kind of play that exists within the educational curriculum. Like free play, inquiry should be intrinsically motivated, personally meaningful and socially engaging to the learner. However, inquiry goes a step further than free play in that it "connotes critical and reflective thought and promotes the attainment of the intellectual capacity of every learner" (Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004, P. 46).

Popularized by the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, the inquiry- or project-based curriculum revolves around the interests and questions of the children. As children
demonstrate an interest in a topic or theme, the teacher provides supports and resources to enable the children to explore and make discoveries about the theme. Books, technology, hands-on artifacts, instruments for writing and creating, discussion and dramatic play are some of the tools in which inquiry is conducted. Children must plan their actions, gather information and construct new ideas. They learn to communicate, negotiate, cooperate and function independently as they explore a cross-curricular topic over an extended period of time. Meanwhile, the teacher is observing and collecting data, participating and guiding play, asking questions and probing thinking.

Like thematic learning, inquiry offers an opportunity to teach students about new concepts and ideas that they would not be likely to discover on their own. What makes inquiry different from themes is the degree of student choice and self-regulation. With the teacher's guidance, the children decide what aspects of the topic they are interested in developing. For example, after reading *Jack and the Beanstalk*, one class had many questions about how tall beans really grow. Several students expressed an interest in growing bean seeds. Some wanted to cut apart a bean seed and look at it under a microscope. Others wanted to find out what are the tallest plants in the world. With the teacher's help, they conducted a computer search, created a chart with pictures and information about some of the tallest trees in the world, then paced out the measurements on the playground.

In the example on the following page, the teacher had introduced the light table to teach about shadows and silhouettes and how light reflects colors. Some of the students became very interested in the way colors blend and recorded their learning, such as "I mixed light blue with dark green and it made turquoise."
While there may be certain key learnings or instructional goals the teacher wants every child to achieve in an inquiry project, it is not necessary for all the students to engage in all the same activities. Inquiry facilitates self-direction while opening the doors to new and exciting learning in kindergarten.