

Kindergarten Curriculum Implementation in the Context of High-Quality Development

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Abstract: In the context of high-quality development in China, it is the trend of the times for preschool education to move towards high-quality development. High-quality development of curriculum is a prerequisite for high-quality development of preschool education. To improve the quality of kindergarten curriculum, the problem of extreme division between free play and direct instruction in the implementation of kindergarten curriculum in China must be solved. Therefore, this paper introduces a new concept of curriculum implementation—guided play, which can deeply integrate play and teaching and promote deep learning in young children's play. As the introduction of guided play in our curriculum implementation still faces challenges, recommendations are made from three perspectives: the state, kindergartens and teachers, in order to improve the problems of kindergarten curriculum implementation and enhance the quality of the curriculum.

Keywords: High-Quality Development; Kindergarten Curriculum Implementation; Play and Teaching; Guided Play

1. Introduction

With the development of the times, China's society is changing from high speed to high-quality development, preschool education is also bound to change from high speed development to high-quality development, which is to satisfy the general public's pursuit of fair and high quality preschool education. At present, China's preschool education has initially completed the development task characterized by high-speed growth, and has achieved unprecedented results, largely improving the problem of "difficult access to school". However, this high rate of development is mainly reflected in the increase in the number of kindergartens and the expansion of the scale, preschool education is still the most shortage part of the entire education system in China, and there are still many problems that need to be solved.^[1]In 2021, Chen Baosheng, then Minister of Education, pointed out that "high quality should be placed in a more prominent position, and for preschool education, high-quality development is a systematic project, and high-quality development of the curriculum is a prerequisite for high-quality development of young children".^[2]Therefore, it is important to do a good job of developing the kindergarten curriculum and to drive the overall high-quality development of preschool education with the high-quality development of the kindergarten curriculum.

2. The Current Situation of Kindergarten Curriculum Implementation in China

The kindergarten curriculum is formed cumulatively through continuous and intensive implementation. Curriculum implementation is a dynamic and adaptive process and there is no stable and solid, always effective method of curriculum implementation.^[3]In the context of today's high-quality development, the implementation of our kindergarten curriculum also needs to evolve and the key to its implementation is to trigger deep learning in young children. The basic attributes of deep learning for young children include: has strong internal motivation, a strong interest and positive attitude, active learning with a high level of emotional engagement; interaction and discussion with partners in 'group situations' to solve problems together; link new knowledge to existing experiences and valuing reflection rather than rote learning; and demonstrate advanced cognitive skills and higher order thinking, transfer knowledge and are able to solve real life problems.^[4]However, in the current implementation of the kindergarten curriculum, there are still two unscientific phenomena that remain at the level of superficial learning for children and do not promote deep learning: firstly, some kindergartens misinterpret "de-primaryisation" as the inability to learn anything and therefore go to the

extreme of free play. Teachers are afraid to teach and give children too much time to play, resulting in a low level of play that is simple and repetitive or even chaotic and out of control, lacking deep learning in play. Secondly, although some kindergarten teachers acknowledge the value of play, they still use direct instruction methods in the implementation of the curriculum, neglecting the autonomy of children's learning, cooperative inquiry, and problem-solving skills. These two types of curriculum implementation are misconceptions about the relationship between free play and direct instruction, seeing play and teaching as separate and opposing ends of the spectrum, and failing to integrate play and teaching well in kindergarten curriculum implementation.

3. The Need to Integrate Play and Teaching in the Implementation of the Curriculum

Constructivism, as represented by Piaget, emphasises that children actively interact with their environment to construct knowledge about the external world, being active participants rather than passive recipients.^[5] Free play has been proven by many studies to be beneficial in improving children's social and emotional aspects as well as self-regulation, and is of great value to children's development. For example, Manujlenko found that young children's levels of self-regulation were higher during play than at other times of the day, and that when a boy was asked to stand guard, he stayed at his post and focused longer than when the teacher asked him to pay attention to something in the lesson.^[6]

According to the theory of cultural-historical development, cultural tools must be transferred to young children by more competent adults; young children cannot acquire them spontaneously, and direct instruction makes children acquire cultural tools with the help of adults and promotes the development of lower to higher mental functions.^[7] And, although Bruner emphasises discovery learning, he also points out that this discovery is a discovery based on the mastery of some basic knowledge, and that direct instruction is more effective in situations where children do not have a knowledge base and can facilitate spontaneous exploration.^[8]

Both free play and direct instruction have great value in their own right, but studies have found that implementing free play alone is not sufficient to support learning goals and prepare for school. Chien et al. found that children who spent the most time in free play made the least progress in language, literacy and mathematics throughout the school year. In turn, direct instruction alone erases the initiative of young children.^[9] Therefore, a pressing issue to be addressed in the implementation of a curriculum that promotes high-quality development in our kindergartens is how to integrate play and academic lessons to ensure that children develop the academic skills necessary to promote deep learning in play with less direct instruction.

4. Introducing Guided Play into Kindergarten Curriculum Implementation

As free play and direct instruction have been extremely dichotomised in the implementation of the curriculum, foreign researchers have combined the best elements of free play and direct instruction: child autonomy and adult scaffolding support, proposing a middle ground approach—guided play.

4.1 Definition and Characteristics of Guided Play

Guided play, based on Piaget's theory, the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding theory, is a form of play activity that lies between direct instruction and free play.^[10] Guided play is learning in which young children are actively involved, where they learn actively in a playful environment and where adults support rather than direct their learning experiences. Neuman proposed the idea of a "continuum", stating that there are three scales for discriminating between work and free play: external or internal control, external or internal motivation, and external or internal reality; Sponseller relies on these. Based on these three scales, the activity of play in general is classified as work, work disguise as play, directed play, guided play and free play.^[11] It can be seen that on this continuum, directed play is the middle ground between free play and work, but the inner control, inner reality and inner motivation of directed play is greater than the outer; it is essentially a child-led activity where the adult scaffolds the child towards the pedagogical goal without depriving the child of autonomy. Although guided play is in the middle of the same continuum as directed play, they are different in that directed play has greater external control by the teacher and is a teacher-initiated, teacher-led activity, whereas guided play is a child-initiated activity. Guided play takes two forms. One is where the adult designs the environment to highlight the learning objectives while ensuring that children have autonomy to explore

in that environment, in which case the teacher provides enrichment materials for the children. The second form is where adults watch and comment on child-led activities, encourage children to ask questions or extend children's interests.^[12]For example, when children are building a house with blocks, if they keep building the exact same house over and over again, the teacher can ask them how to build a taller house. This process not only guides children's thinking about how to build, but also enables them to learn the concepts of height and shortness during play and develops their comparative thinking.

4.2 Effectiveness of Guided Play

Guided play has been shown in several studies to promote young children's academic development, playing an effective role in language skills, literacy, maths and science, and promoting deep learning in play. Guided play also has a positive impact on social-emotional development, resulting in better emotional regulation, less stress and a reduction in problem behaviour.^[13]In a meta-analyses of 164 studies, Alfieri et al.found that learners engaged in more learning through a guided play (enhanced discovery learning) approach compared to direct instruction or free play, and noted that guided play offers a promising pedagogical approach as it promotes young children's thinking rather than merely making them carry out mechanical commands.^[14]

The concept of guided play permeates a number of curricula and national policy documents explored in Western countries,these curricula provide teachers with lesson plans to follow.In which playful activities are strategically organised to provide focused, continuous and cumulative learning opportunities for children, effectively enhancing the quality of the curriculum and promoting early childhood development. The 'Piramide' project in the Netherlands, for example, proposes three levels of effective teacher-led play, in which teachers provide a rich and structured play environment for children, with different levels of support and guidance according to the developmental level of the child, and use dynamic assessment to flexibly adapt the programme.^[15]The US 'Tools of the Mind' programme focuses on pretend play as a leading activity for kindergarten children, with particular attention to the role of adults in framing children's play, in which teachers observe children's play, assess levels of play and provide children with targeted tools to support development of play, helping children to take their play to a more mature level and to acquire new vocabulary and develop text comprehension skills.^[16]Pilots of the curriculum have demonstrated its potential for developing children's early education skills and it is increasingly being used as an early childhood education programme across the USA.

In guided play, children actively lead the play, interacting with the teacher and peers, continually reflecting on problem solving through teacher questioning, and new information is meaningfully linked to children's existing knowledge and experience. Guided play fits perfectly with the qualities of deep learning in young children and illustrates the effectiveness of guided play in promoting deep learning in young children.^[17]

4.3 Challenges to the Introduction of Guided Play in Curriculum Implementation

The effectiveness of guided play has been proven, but the introduction of guided play into our curriculum practices presents a great challenge for teachers.

Firstly, the extent to which guidance is given to children and when to intervene to guide them places high demands on teachers. Each child is unique and differs in various aspects of background knowledge, cognitive style and practical experience. Guided play is not a fixed teaching model but is dynamic, and Markant and Gureckis' research suggests that a set of evidence that is effective in facilitating learning for one person may be less effective when presented to another,^[18]therefore being responsive to the current experience and ability status of the learner, with inexperienced learners receiving more guidance or supervision and experienced learners receiving less intervention,giving young children the guidance that will best stimulate the emergence of their marginal skills. The timing of guidance is also important. Pereira et al.note that, given the same guidance, timely versus untimely guidance has a different impact on children's learning outcomes,does not interrupt children's play rigidly, but intervenes when children need guidance most.^[19]In addition,guided play is influenced by children's emotions and engagement. What children learn from playful interactions depends on their mental state and motivation at the time, including their goals, attention, emotions, and trust in their play partners.^[20]It is therefore a great challenge for teachers to know how much and when to intervene to guide a high level of play during curriculum practice to better balance child-initiated and adult scaffolding. Teachers need a solid theoretical foundation and a high level of expertise to be able to

assess the level of play of each child based on careful observation of them, and to analyse precisely whether, how and when children's play needs to be guided.

Secondly, teachers have difficulties in conducting assessment in play-based learning environments. Some researchers have identified three types of assessment in kindergarten curriculum practice: first, observational assessment during free play to assess children's developmental goals; second, academic assessment by having children exit play; third, embedded assessment based on play-based learning, which occurs when teachers are involved in children's play and are able to assess both developmental and learning goals.^[21] At present, embedded assessment based on play-based learning is less common in the actual environment of our kindergartens, where teachers tend to withdraw children from play for assessment rather than assess them during play. For teachers, assessment and play are opposing concepts, as exiting play for group standardised assessment requires very little from teachers, while assessment in play-based learning requires more from teachers, who need to collect dynamic developmental data on each student during play, closely monitor growth on the psychological trajectory of children's development, and analyse the diverse data collected.^[22]

As can be seen, the implementation of guided play requires a high level of professionalism and a small teacher-student ratio, and many teachers in China are currently not at a high level of professionalism, with some not having come from a preschool education background at all, nor having received full professional training, and are not sufficiently competent to implement and assess guided play. Moreover, the relatively large teacher-student ratio in our kindergartens adds to the difficulties teachers have in implementing guided play and its assessment. Teachers do not have the time to carefully observe each child and guide them to a high level of learning, nor do they have the time to collect data on the dynamic development of each child in play, and even if teachers are able to collect a large amount of data on student learning, it is difficult to analyse this data due to its diversity and volume. As a result, in many cases teachers are left with group teaching or free play and standardised post-play assessments of children.

5. Implications of Guided Play for the Implementation of Kindergarten Curriculum in China

We can learn from the concept of 'guided play' and the excellent curriculum models under the guidance of the concept advocated by Western countries, but due to the differences in culture and the actual teaching environment of preschool education, we cannot just copy the successful models and ignore the local reality in China. In view of the challenges faced in the introduction of guided play into China's kindergarten curriculum, the following recommendations are made in order to improve the implementation of the curriculum and enhance its quality.

At the national level, policies should be introduced to reduce the teacher-student ratio in kindergartens, control class size, strengthen investment in preschool education, build new kindergartens and bring in teachers, raise the threshold for teacher entry, improve teacher salaries and strengthen the cultivation of a high-quality teaching force; policy development should focus on the children's perspective, fully consider the characteristics of children's physical and mental development, to discover what is really meaningful for children what is truly meaningful to children, and to truly promote children's long-term development and learning in a holistic manner;^[23] specific, actionable and diverse play assessment criteria should be developed to ensure they are appropriate and promote children's development, and to provide kindergartens and teachers with a reference for assessment.

At the kindergarten level, the kindergarten curriculum should focus more on the process of children's play and their assessment during play, so that children can learn and develop their skills through play; pre-service and in-service training for kindergarten teachers should be strengthened, so that new ideas on curriculum implementation can be communicated to teachers in a timely manner and teachers' professional ability can be enhanced, so that teachers are able to better integrate play and teaching in their curriculum practice and give children a higher quality curriculum; a teacher research group should be set up in kindergartens to provide a platform for teachers to study and learn. In research group, teachers can study together how to guide children's Autonomous play behaviour scientifically through the creation of the environment and the input of play materials, how to analyse children's developmental needs through observation of children's play, and how to seize teaching opportunities so that teachers can truly understand how to carry out play teaching in the implementation of the curriculum.

For teachers, the first thing they need to do is to strengthen their learning, attend more training and lectures, pay more attention to the latest academic research and educational concepts at home and

abroad, change their own educational concepts, see children as equal and independent individuals, give children enough time to play in the course of curriculum practice, respect children's play, strengthen their understanding of play teaching, and actively improve their own ability to conduct high level play and to assess in a play-based learning environment. Secondly, teachers need to take a dialectical view of the relationship between play and teaching, and adopt a variety of approaches to curriculum implementation. In practice, teachers need to keep their mouths shut and avoid interfering with tasks that children can do on their own without teacher guidance, while for content that children cannot explore and learn on their own, it is the teacher who needs to teach it directly. Therefore, teachers should learn to observe children and choose the most appropriate method of implementing the curriculum by combining free play, guided play, directed play and direct instruction, depending on the specific situation and the individual differences of the children. Finally, teachers should also help parents change their mindset so that they recognise the importance of play and cooperate fully with teachers in teaching play and returning happy play to children. Parents should also limit the amount of time their children spend on electronic screens and allow them to interact and play with their peers more often, giving their children's imagination a chance to blossom.

6. Conclusion

In order to build a high-quality preschool education system, it is urgent to improve the practical problems existing in the implementation of kindergarten curriculum. Play and teaching are not opposing ends of the spectrum and their relationship needs to be viewed dialectically. Guided play is not a specific method of implementation, but only a philosophy. In practice, there is still a need to continue exploring how early childhood educators can adopt specific methods to implement the kindergarten curriculum, to truly integrate play and teaching in depth, and to realise the learning development of young children on the basis of giving them a happy childhood.

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