What Preschool Children Like Best about School

Learn how teachers can gain a strong understanding of what engages and motivates young children to provide more meaningful, high quality learning experiences.

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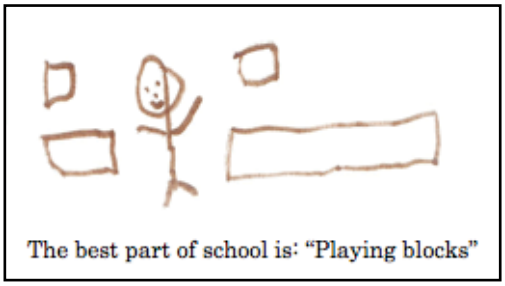
In recent years, early care professionals have begun to look to children's interests to plan the classroom environment and learning experiences. Research has shown that children are more deeply engaged in the learning process when the topic of study is meaningful, relevant, and personally significant (Helm, 2015). By closely observing young children, reflecting on practice, and building dynamic relationships, teachers gain a strong understanding of what engages and motivates young children, and can provide more meaningful, high quality learning experiences.

When asked to conduct a needs assessment for a large Midwestern social service organization that provides Head Start services for low-income children, we purposefully included the children's point of view. Typically, needs assessments evaluate issues and resources from an adult perspective; however, we felt it was critical to include the voices of the children as valuable sources of information on both the classroom environment and curriculum. We wanted to reveal how children perceived their school and what they liked best about school--more specifically, what were their favorite areas and activities at school. This information would be important, especially in decisions about the allocation of time and funds for classrooms and programming.

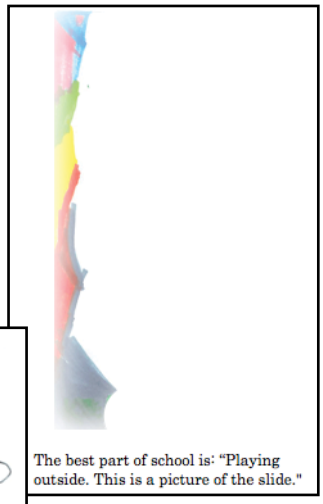
What Do You Like Best About School?

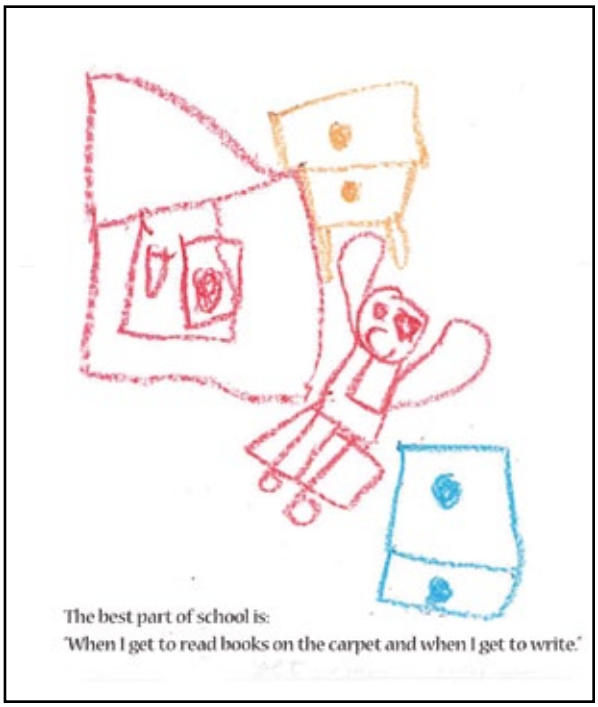
We asked 252 preschool children from six Head Start programs what they like best about school. The average age of this group was 3.75 years, and gender distribution was approximately 50-50. (Some teachers did not report gender.) The assessment was presented in an open-ended format to allow children to answer in a manner that reflected their personal experience at school. Children were asked to respond to the question "What


The best part of school is: "Playing blocks"


The best part of school is: "Drawing with my friends"


The best part of school is: Playing with my friends.


The best part of school is: "Playing outside. This is a picture of the slide."


The best part of school is: "When I get to read books on the carpet and when I get to write."

is the best part of school?" both verbally and through drawing. We felt drawing would help the children communicate their thoughts to the teachers more completely, especially when asked to talk about their drawing (Coates & Coates, 2006). The drawings themselves were not analyzed as they were meant only to support the children's discussions with the teachers.

The Children's Responses

The children's responses were tabulated for each activity/area of the classroom. Some of the children listed multiple activities or areas of the classroom that were "best", all of which were recorded in the results. The children identified 23 activities that were further analyzed and grouped into 10 areas

For example, drawing, painting, play dough and music were grouped into "arts" and writing and reading were grouped into "literacy" (Figure 2).

We were touched by the children's responses and felt these were significant areas to study and reflect on for our practice as educators. If children say these are the areas they like best, then we can assume that they spend a majority of their free time there. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the six areas that received the greatest number of responses from the children and discuss recent research that advises how we can enrich those areas, thus enhancing the children's educational experiences.

Blocks and Manipulatives

Sixty-nine children mentioned blocks and manipulatives as the best part of school, of whom 30 chose

Figure 1: Areas children identifed as liking "best about school"

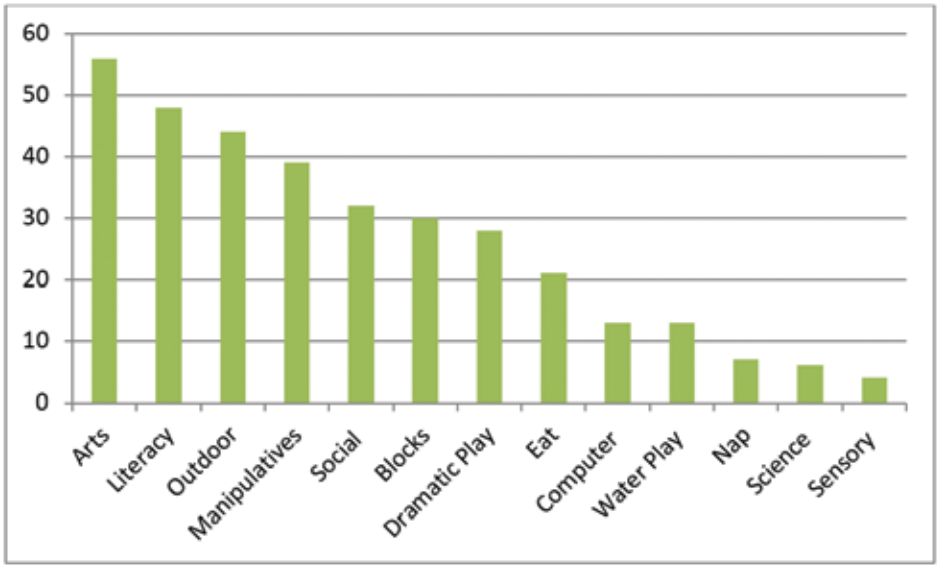


Figure 2: Activities included in "liked areas"

Area:	Includes:
Arts	drawing, paint, playdough, music
Literacy	writing, reading
Dramatic Play	dramatic play, puppets
Social	friends, teachers
Blocks and Manipulatives	blocks, cars, legos, magnets, dominoes animals, number bears, etc.
Science	science, live animals
Water play	water play indoors, water play outdoors

blocks and 39 specified manipulatives such as Legos, cars, magnet, dominoes, and plastic animals. We chose to combine these open-ended materials because they are all used in constructive play.

In sharp contrast to worksheets, hands-on materials such as blocks and manipulatives encourage experiential learning. Children who engage with hands-on open-ended materials demonstrate higher levels of creativity and problem-solving abilities (Drew & Rankin, 2004). Tunks (2009) provides practical suggestions for incorporating blocks into the early childhood classroom and discusses the implications for learning across social, language, and math domains. Blocks have specifically been linked to foundational skills related to STEM learning. Through block play, children experiment with mathematical concepts such as geometric thinking, measurement, and patterning (Ness & Farenga, 2007) which is shown to have positive long-term effects on math achievement (Petersen & Levine, 2014). Children also learn about science concepts such as gravity, balance and characteristics of objects through

Photos Courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

What I like best: Sand and water play

block and manipulative play (Chalufour & Worth, 2004). Engineering-related behavior in early childhood includes constructing, problem solving, evaluating design and explaining how things are built--opportunities readily available through hands-on play (Bairaktarova, Evangelou, Bagiati, & Brophy 2011). Block and manipulative play are shown to support language development and literacy (Cohen & Uhry, 2007), and provide opportunities to practice social, spatial, language, and math skills (Ramani, Zippert, Schweitzer, & Pan, 2014).

The concept of *loose parts* is gaining awareness in early childhood settings as a way to use unique and inexpensive materials for construction and in the block area. The term, coined by architect Simon Nicholson (1972), refers to open-ended materials that can be moved, built with, and designed in endless ways: "*In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.*" (Nicholson, 1972, p 6). Blocks and manipulatives such as Magna-tiles and Legos, are examples of loose parts because there is no one right way to use them, which provides flexibility in children's play (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2015). It is important to support this innate desire to experiment with materials by encouraging children to draw on their creativity, rather than relying on manuals and pre-made designs (Drew & Rankin, 2004).

Hands-on materials encourage experiential learning.

Recommendations for Practice

Often props such as small animals or cars are provided in the block area; however, swatches of fabric, small rocks, or a basket of sticks can provide even greater opportunities for creative and flexible play. Recycled loose parts such as cardboard tubes, plastic bottle caps, or tin cans provide alternative building materials to use alone or with blocks. Their varied properties expose children to different textures, shapes, and forms—which build STEM awareness. Recycled and natural materials are not only inexpensive, they extend and enhance constructive play and invite sorting, counting, and patterning.

Related fiction and non-fiction books add language, while authentic art prints can increase art awareness and inspire new construction ideas in the block play area (Giles & Vitulli, 2013). Writing materials allow children to make signs for their structures and represent them through drawing (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005).

In addition, consider bringing blocks and manipulatives into different areas of the classroom. For example, children can use a basket of cubes in dramatic play to fit their play scenarios, such as making food for a pet. Not only will this provide more flexibility in children's play, it also prompts children who may not usually venture to the block and manipulative areas to experience the benefits of this play.

Arts

The arts were a top choice for 56 children as "the best part of school." Of the four subcategories--drawing, paint, play dough, and music--drawing comprised the greatest response.

While the arts are often referred to as "enrichment," engagement in the arts has been linked to higher academic achievement and positive emotional changes in children (Kinney & Forsythe, 2005) and increased self-esteem (Ruppert, 2006). Children who engage in open-ended art activities develop flexibility and

are more willing to take risks and experiment in their work (Ruppert, 2006).

Recommendations for Practice

Based on our findings about children's preferences and research suggesting the multiple benefits of engaging in arts activities, preschools can consider designing learning environments that support open-ended art exploration. It is important to have an art area in the classroom and to expand the variety of materials and opportunities for exploration. Experiences and materials can include clay, wire, recycled materials, printmaking, paint mixing, collage, as well as drawing. Focusing on process over producing a product is key if we want children to use art as a method of expression (Pelo, 2007). Providing high quality materials and protective coverings (smocks, floor covering) can reduce frustration and increase engagement and enjoyment. Provide books and prints with authentic and varied forms of artwork.

Talking with children about their art helps teachers learn about them (Vecchi, 2010). Look at children's work together, ask how children think about their work, take dictation, be respectful of their words, and use rich vocabulary such as "sculpture" and "forms." Funding for training and authentic art materials can be considered to increase teachers' understandings and to provide materials (Pelo, 2007).

What I like best: Reading books

Photos Courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Literacy

Twenty-five children specified writing, primarily "writing my name," as their favorite part of school, and 23 referred to reading. Writing letters is linked with early literacy skills including alphabetic knowledge and phonemic awareness, and in supportive classrooms writing materials are linked to alphabet knowledge and name-writing ability (Drouin & Harmon, 2009; Guo, Justice, Kaderavek, & McGinty, 2012).

Recommendations for Practice

Writing experiences for young children should follow their interests and be infused into everyday experiences. Preschoolers can begin by learning to write their own name, such as signing into the classroom each morning, adding their own names to waiting lists for desired activities, and creating class-made books that mimic predictable read aloud books. Teachers can provide name cards for support. Writing tables or centers can include fun writing utensils, paper, supports such as the alphabet and a picture dictionary. Writing belongs throughout the classroom, with pencils and clipboards available in the block, dramatic play, art, and science areas for children to record messages and observations.

Preschool teachers should provide a range of reading experiences, including group read-alouds, reading with individual children, books

on audio, having children read to one another, and story extensions to retell a story. While reading aloud to young children is important, interactive shared book reading during the preschool years provides distinct advantages for young children, supporting achievement and enthusiasm (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2002).

Outdoor/Gross Motor

Of the children interviewed, 42 referred to outdoor play or indoor large motor play as the best part of school. Children specifically mentioned outside water play, bicycles, slides, "climbing up on the big climber all the way to the top," and kicking balls. Several responses indicated a connection to nature—for example, flowers or clouds. One boy provided this introspection, "*When I see the sun, it makes me calm down.*" This powerful statement should be strongly considered when allotting time for outdoor play which provides meaningful learning experiences and fosters an affinity for the natural world (Carr & Luken, 2014).

Exposure to nature deeply impacts psychological well-being (Kellert, 2005) and free play in natural areas is shown to foster skills and attitudes related to self-determination (Kochanowski & Carr, 2014). In addition, there is a growing body of literature exploring the link between physical activity, healthy brain development, and increased learning outcomes, which further supports the need to get children moving and outdoors (Hung, Chang, Tang, & Shih, 2008).

Recommendations for Practice

One way to promote free, active play is to simply increase the amount of time children spend outdoors. A decision to increase outdoor playtime is supported by play researchers, as well as the findings of this study about children's preferred activities. Outdoor learning environments can be enhanced with plants and natural loose parts such as tree stumps, logs, rocks, and a variety of topical materials such as grass, dirt and mulch. Simple changes such as these increase opportunities for gross motor development and provide direct access to nature. Kernan (2007) identified important characteristics of outdoor play from the perspective of children and found that movement, obtaining a different vantage point, finding and constructing small spaces (i.e. forts, caves, hiding spots), constructing, building, and designing with open-ended materials, direct contact with plants and animals, and social interaction are significant outdoor experiences for young children.

Outdoor play provides meaningful learning experiences.

Children can also enjoy indoor activities outside, such as reading, dramatic play, and building in outdoor environments. Clipboards, magnifying glasses, and measuring tapes encourage children to develop observation and inquiry skills that are important to scientific ways of thinking and add richness to outdoor play.

Social

School has a strong social component, evidenced by 32 children's responses that mentioned playing with their friends and teachers as the best thing about school. Friends are significant to a child's healthy social emotional development and provide a framework for developing social competence (Kostelnik,Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2009; Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, & Rydell, 2011). Social competence is generally defined as an individual's ability to initiate and maintain satisfying, reciprocal relationships with peers (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Children who struggle with peer relationships may have fewer opportunities to practice social skills, and ultimately may experience more social and academic problems throughout school. They are also at risk for dropping out of school, experience high rates of absenteeism and suspension, and are often referred for special education services (Bukowski, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011). Further studies have found that peer relationships contribute to children's socio-emotional adjustment, academic performance, and self-concept (Kalb, Way, Warren-Khot, Rhoades, & Bassett, 2013). A child's peer relationships in kindergarten are accurate predictors of his/her later social competence (Guhn, Gadermann, Almas, Schonert-Reichl, & Hertzman, 2016). While many children may easily enter play situations and form friendships, other children need support to attain these social skills. With implications such as these, it is imperative for early childhood teachers to understand what social competence encompasses and how to facilitate its development.

Recommendations for Practice

Early childhood professionals can support children's social development through the physical environment of

the classroom when they consider it as the "third teacher" (Malaguzzi, 1998). Educators can examine the areas of group composition (how children are grouped within the classroom), classroom activities, and materials. Mixed age classrooms afford opportunities to interact with same- and different-age classmates and provide them with chances to offer nurturing, support, leadership, and cooperation. Educators can manipulate the ways children are grouped within the classroom, such as by limiting the number of centers that are available (Bovey & Strain, 2003). This will likely increase the number of children at each center, thereby enhancing the opportunity for social interaction. Using interesting or novel toys and equipment is likely to encourage conversation about the items, as well as promote cooperation and sharing (Bovey & Strain, 2003). The size of the space can also determine how much social interaction takes place, with small spaces encouraging less interaction and larger, more open spaces allowing children to work together.

Teachers may also consider using project work, which gives children the opportunity to investigate topics of interest. Projects, or group investigations that are meaningful to the children create opportunities for social interaction and help to improve social relationships (Helm & Katz, 2011). Children who are engaged in meaningful and satisfying activities are less prone to be discontented in other areas of life such as social relationships (Katz & McClellan, 1997). The investigation may also lend itself to building things together and supporting and challenging each other as children work to understand their world. The social interactions that take place when children share their discoveries form the basis of meaningful peer interaction (Griebling, Elgas, & Konerman, 2015) when children contribute ideas, discuss findings, problem solve, and compromise. Children's ideas and work are valued, encouraging them to continue on their quest.

Teachers can also promote social competence by building a sense of community in which children support and nurture each other. Teachers can begin to create a classroom community by practicing principles of inclusion in regards to staff, parents, and the community. Teachers can also help children to form relationships with each other by finding content that is interesting to both children.

What I like best: Playing with friends (and frogs!)

Photos Courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Dramatic Play

Twenty-eight children in this study selected dramatic play as a favorite aspect of their school day, mentioning the dolls, puppets, and kitchen area. Early childhood professionals have long valued play, particularly pretend play, as important for children's development (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). Research has specifically examined socio-dramatic play and its role in supporting children's development, both cognitive and social-emotional (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Smith, 2010). Children who are participating in socio-dramatic play often function at a stage above their current developmental level (Cemore & Herwig, 2005; Vygotsky, 1966). They are able to involve themselves in a type of play that requires them to be someone they are not and follow social rules that they may not normally follow. Socio-dramatic play also supports children's language abilities.

Recommendations for Practice

Preschool aged children need opportunities to engage in extended dramatic play, including allowing a significant amount of time to plan and act out the play. Dramatic play areas can invite advanced play schemes by expanding what children already know, such as visiting a pet store, a fire station, a farmer's

market, or a pizza parlor. Allowing children to create the props and use items from other areas of the classroom will extend the play scenario and enhance their symbolic function skills. You need only to provide enough props to get the play started. Eliminate limits on how many children can play in the area, or increase the number of children allowed to play there to encourage complex role play or simply to adjust to changing demands when other children join the existing play scheme.

Conclusion

Why should we listen to children for input on how to enhance the classroom and experiences we provide for them each day? It makes sense that when children are interested and excited about materials and activities they will stay engaged longer, and engagement leads to learning (Helm, 2015). While this study focused on what children in one Midwestern preschool setting liked best about school, you might consider conducting your own mini-study. Think about asking the children you are with everyday what they like best about school. Choose one of those areas to study in more depth. Investigate current research and practice to enhance your program. Resources for these are provided at the end of this article.

Get involved in early childhood learning communities locally where you can study and share ideas. We want to inspire you to make a change in your life as a teacher, in the learning that occurs for the children and families you work with and connect with the children in our classroom in significant ways.

Additional Resources

Art

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The Home Visiting Membership will include:

- *Dimensions of Early Childhood* for Home Visitors: Selected articles from our refereed journal, Dimensions of Early Childhood…6 issues per year
- *Dimensions Extra* for Home Visitors: Additional resources to support professional development and parent education on the topic of the article from Dimensions of Early Childhood for Home Visitors….6 issues per year
- A Specialized Page on the SECA website that will be devoted to issues of interest to home visitors and a blog platform that will allow members to interact with colleagues from throughout the region and nation
- Member discounts on attendance at the annual SECA conference with specialized content for home visitors and SECA publications and resources.

This limited membership will be available for only $30 per year; however, for just a few dollars more, you can join your state association and enjoy the full benefits of SECA and state membership.

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