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Table of contents: Capstone project

Abstract & Introduction	1 - 2
Project Topic	1
Research questions and objectives	2 - 3
Research Questions	2
Research Method.....	2 - 3
Procedure	3
Review of related literature:	
Findings and discussion.....	4 - 7
Data analysis.....	7 - 14
Student Survey.....	7 - 12
Teacher discussions	12 - 14
Conclusion.....	14 - 15
References.....	16 - 17

The Role of Early Childhood Education in Promoting Social and Emotional Development: A Comparative Study of Play-Based and Academically-Focused Programs.

Abstract

This research paper assesses and compares the effectiveness of Play-Based and Academically Focused Programs in primary schools. Each program has its own unique set of learning benefits and disadvantages. Due to the increase in demands from parents and the technological advancements made in schools, it has become challenging to find a program that is suited for a wide variety of students without putting them in a 'box' and expecting all students to learn in the same manner. How can early childhood educators effectively integrate play-based and academic elements to optimize social and emotional development in young children? This question is the end goal of this paper. I conducted the research through an in-class survey, discussions with teachers and previously researched data. A survey that included thirteen questions answered by 35 Grade 2 and 3 students would give a teacher an advantage by asking their students how they would like to learn best. The finding of this study is as follows: By incorporating both play-based and academic elements into teaching primary school students, educators will find an increase in interest and responsibility from students regarding their education.

Introduction

As a primary school teacher, I have had the privilege of working with a diverse group of young learners, each with their own unique challenges and accomplishments. Through experiences in the classroom, I have come to recognize the vital role that early childhood education plays in fostering social and emotional development in children. This research paper explores the effectiveness of two distinct approaches to early childhood education: play-based and academically-focused programs.

In our fast-paced world, the importance of social and emotional skills cannot be overstated. These skills form the foundation for healthy relationships and personal well-being and lay the groundwork for academic success. Understanding how different educational approaches impact the development of these crucial skills is essential for educators, parents, and policymakers alike.

Through a comparative study, this research aims to shed light on the relative strengths and weaknesses of play-based and academically-focused early childhood education programs in promoting social and emotional growth. By looking at real-world examples and evidence gained in classrooms, we should always seek to provide insights that can inform educational decision-making and contribute to the best practices for nurturing our young student's minds.

Research Questions and Objectives

The main objective of this research paper is to compare play-based learning and academic programs in primary schools and investigate their impact on social and emotional development. Due to a changing environment in schools and economies, there have been many debates about how young children should be taught to prepare them for the future better and to identify the effectiveness of schooling systems that have stayed the same for many years. This includes the understanding that cultural, financial and parental influences impact how students learn.

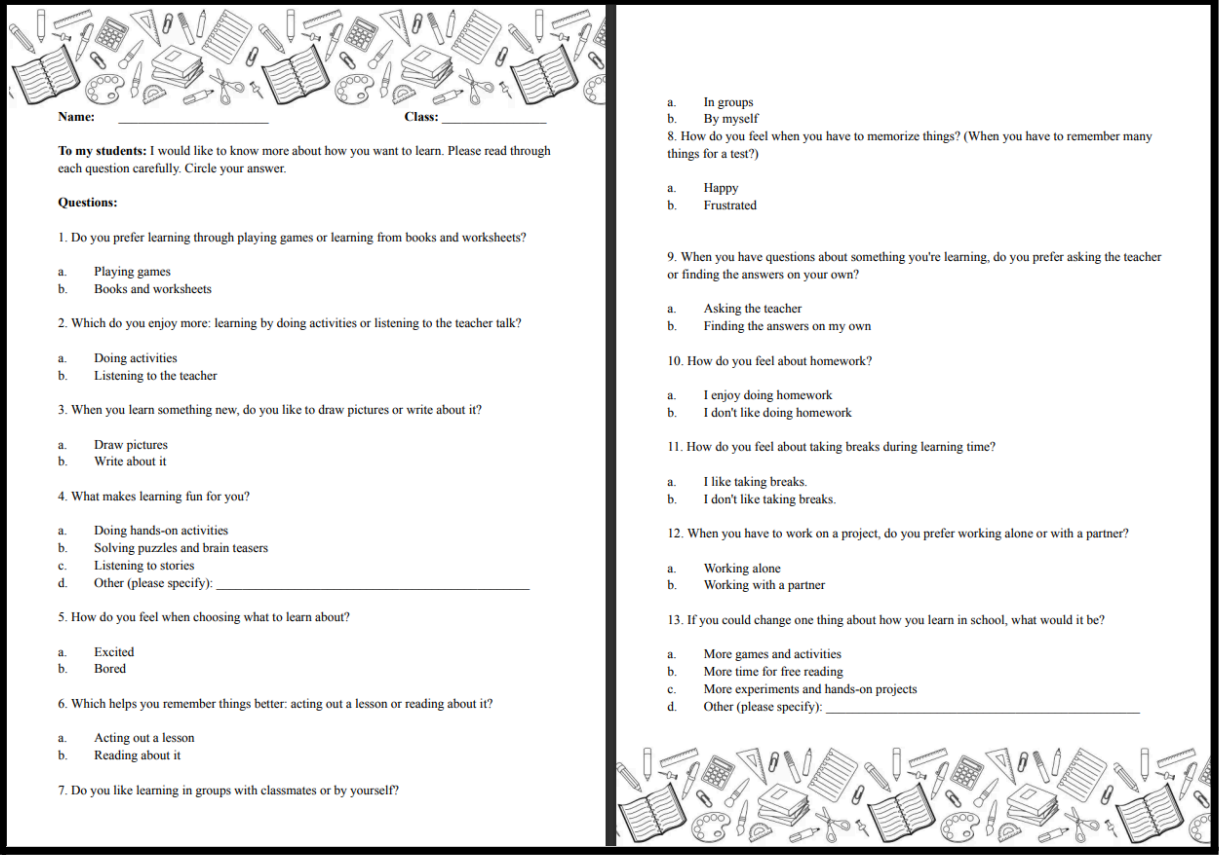
The following questions will be answered to achieve a better understanding of each program:

1. How are play-based early childhood education programs different from academically-focused ones promoting social and emotional development?
2. What are the specific social and emotional skills children develop through participation in these programs?
3. What are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and children regarding the effectiveness of the programs?
4. How do factors such as classroom environment, teacher-child interactions, and curriculum content influence the outcomes of these programs?
5. What cultural factors influence the implementation and effectiveness of these programs in different communities?

Method

The methods used for this paper include researching various articles and collecting data about different programs and methods used in classrooms. An additional survey was created for personal use and insight into the comparative study. Data collected from these articles was used to create a standard pro and con list to compare the effects of these programs on young learners. The list was carefully structured into paragraphs comparing the programs and answering questions stated above.

The survey was conducted in two primary school classrooms with Grade 2 and 3 students. The students were given an appropriate amount of time to complete the survey and ask any related questions in class. The decision to allow the students to complete the survey in person was to explain to them what each question meant so that there was no misunderstanding or ‘guessing’ answers to get a more accurate collection of data. This also ensured that the information collected was strictly student answers with no influence from parents.



Name: _____ **Class:** _____

To my students: I would like to know more about how you want to learn. Please read through each question carefully. Circle your answer.

Questions:

1. Do you prefer learning through playing games or learning from books and worksheets?
 - a. Playing games
 - b. Books and worksheets
2. Which do you enjoy more: learning by doing activities or listening to the teacher talk?
 - a. Doing activities
 - b. Listening to the teacher
3. When you learn something new, do you like to draw pictures or write about it?
 - a. Draw pictures
 - b. Write about it
4. What makes learning fun for you?
 - a. Doing hands-on activities
 - b. Solving puzzles and brain teasers
 - c. Listening to stories
 - d. Other (please specify): _____
5. How do you feel when choosing what to learn about?
 - a. Excited
 - b. Bored
6. Which helps you remember things better: acting out a lesson or reading about it?
 - a. Acting out a lesson
 - b. Reading about it
7. Do you like learning in groups with classmates or by yourself?
 - a. In groups
 - b. By myself
8. How do you feel when you have to memorize things? (When you have to remember many things for a test?)
 - a. Happy
 - b. Frustrated
9. When you have questions about something you're learning, do you prefer asking the teacher or finding the answers on your own?
 - a. Asking the teacher
 - b. Finding the answers on my own
10. How do you feel about homework?
 - a. I enjoy doing homework
 - b. I don't like doing homework
11. How do you feel about taking breaks during learning time?
 - a. I like taking breaks.
 - b. I don't like taking breaks.
12. When you have to work on a project, do you prefer working alone or with a partner?
 - a. Working alone
 - b. Working with a partner
13. If you could change one thing about how you learn in school, what would it be?
 - a. More games and activities
 - b. More time for free reading
 - c. More experiments and hands-on projects
 - d. Other (please specify): _____

(Survey)

Procedure

- a. Simplify frequently asked questions on programs in primary schools.
- b. Research the validity and reliability of articles supporting the research.
- c. Discuss comparing play-based and academic programs with fellow teachers.
- d. Create a survey relying on student opinions.
- e. Ask fellow teachers to evaluate the survey.
- f. Ask permission from parents or guardians to conduct the survey.
- g. Conduct the survey in class while assisting students.
- h. Compare data collected with professional and personal experiences.
- i. Conclude information collected with personal input.

Review of related literature: Findings and discussions

1. How are play-based early childhood education programs different from academically-focused programs in promoting social and emotional development?

Play-based early childhood education programs focus on letting children learn through play and exploration rather than structured academic activities. In these programs, kids have lots of time to play with toys, interact with others, and use their imagination. This helps them develop necessary social and emotional skills like sharing, taking turns, and understanding feelings. They learn social and emotional skills naturally through their interactions and experiences. (Jones, n.d.)

Academically-focused programs concentrate more on teaching specific academic skills like reading, writing and math from a young age. While these programs may also include social activities, they often need more time for unstructured play. In academically focused programs, these skills might be taught explicitly but may not receive as much attention as academic subjects.

2. What are the specific social and emotional skills that children develop through participation in play-based and academically-focused programs?

In play-based programs, children develop skills such as sharing, cooperation, empathy, problem-solving, and self-regulation. They learn to take turns and share toys with other children. During play activities, they work together to achieve common goals.

They understand and care about how others feel, which is often practiced through pretend play. They are finding and learning to control their emotions and behavior, such as waiting patiently for a turn. (Lillard, 2012)

In academically focused programs, children might develop social and emotional skills like listening, confidence, organizational skills and resilience. They learn to pay attention and follow instructions during lessons, sticking with tasks even though they are difficult. They build confidence by completing tasks and mastering new skills and learning from mistakes made in class.

3. What are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and children regarding the effectiveness of play-based and academically-focused programs?

Parents often see play-based programs as great for their children's social and emotional growth because they believe kids learn best through play and interaction with others. They think these programs help children develop important skills like sharing, empathy and problem-solving in a natural and enjoyable way. (Li, 2024)

However, after personally discussing this with colleagues, most teachers feel more pressure from the parents than from the school. Most parents are very demanding, stating that if they don't see more written work, tests and homework, they don't believe that their child is learning anything.

Teachers who support play-based programs also believe they're effective in fostering social and emotional growth. They see children thriving when they have the freedom to explore and learn through play. Teachers in academically-focused programs might feel pressured to meet academic standards, but many still recognize the value of social and emotional skills and try to incorporate them into their teaching.

Through personal observations, children usually enjoy play-based programs because they get to have fun and make friends while learning. They feel less stressed and more confident when they're encouraged to play and explore at their own pace. However, some children might prefer academically-focused programs if they enjoy structured learning and feel proud of their academic achievements.

4. How do factors such as classroom environment, teacher-child interactions, and curriculum content influence the outcomes of these programs?

Classroom environment, teacher-child interaction and curriculum content influence how students and teachers feel in class. A friendly, welcoming classroom with lots of space for play can help children feel comfortable and ready to learn. If the environment is safe and stimulating, they are more likely to engage with others and try new things, which promotes social and emotional growth. (Hudson, 2022)

Warm, supportive and attentive teachers help children feel cared for and valued. When teachers listen to children, praise their efforts and provide guidance when needed, they boost their confidence and encourage positive social interactions. Strong relationships between

teachers and children also create a sense of security and trust, which is important for emotional development.

What children learn and do in class can affect their social and emotional skills. In play-based programs, activities that encourage cooperation, problem-solving, and imaginative play help kids develop these skills naturally. In academically-focused programs, lessons that involve group work, discussions, and activities promoting empathy and self-awareness can also foster social and emotional growth.

5. What cultural factors influence the implementation and effectiveness of these programs in different communities?

The way play-based and academically-focused early childhood education programs are implemented and how effective they are can be influenced by various cultural and contextual factors in different communities or regions. Cultural beliefs, parental expectations, socioeconomic status, cultural practices, language and communication and government policies are all factors.

Different cultures may have varying beliefs about the importance of play and academics in early childhood education. Some cultures may prioritize academic success from a young age, while others may value play and social interactions more. Students from different cultural backgrounds frequently feel excluded in schools due to a curriculum that heavily favors one culture over another. It is incompatible with the integrated and familiar culture to which they belong. (*The Impact of Culture on Education*, 2022)

Parents' expectations for their children's education can influence the type of program they prefer. Some parents may want their children to focus on academics early on, while others may prioritize social and emotional development through play.

A community's resources, such as education funding and access to high-quality preschools, can impact the implementation and effectiveness of early childhood education programs. Lower-income communities may have fewer resources for play-based programs, leading to a focus on academics instead.

Cultural practices related to parenting can also shape the approach to early childhood education. Students from these different backgrounds would have varied learning preferences. Their priorities in life and what matters to their families will influence how they behave in the classroom. Cultures that emphasize community and cooperation may value play-based programs that promote social interaction, while those that focus on individual achievement may prefer academically focused programs.

The language spoken in the community and the communication styles of educators and families can affect how well children engage with different types of programs. Learning English as a second language is challenging for all students. Using a singular teaching method might not be successful in explaining the content of the lesson. Programs that align with the community's language and communication preferences may be more effective.

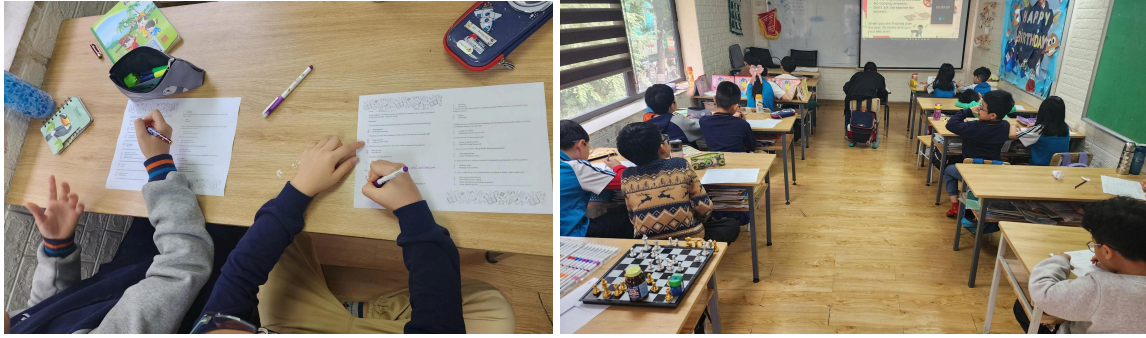
Government policies and regulations regarding early childhood education can influence the availability and structure of play-based and academically-focused programs. Some regions may have specific standards or requirements that shape the implementation of these programs. However, in some countries, governments do not require students to go to school and rely on the parents to teach their own children. (Yeban & Mills, 2024)

Considering these cultural and contextual factors is important for ensuring that early childhood education programs meet the needs and preferences of the communities they serve.

Data analysis



Grade 2 class completing the survey.



Grade 3 class completing the survey.

(Note to evaluator: Parents and guardians were asked permission to use these photos as they do not show the student's faces.)

Questions	Student answers	
(Q1) Do you prefer learning through playing games or learning from books and worksheets?	(A) Playing games 3/35 Students	(B) Books and worksheets 7/35 Students
	(C) Both 25/35 Students	
(Q2) Which do you enjoy more: learning by doing activities or listening to the teacher talk?	(A) Doing activities 17/35 Students	(B) Listening to the teacher 18/35 Students
(Q3) When you learn something new, do you like to draw pictures or write about it?	(A) Draw pictures 22/35 Students	(B) Write about it 13/35 Students
(Q4) What makes learning fun for you?	(A) Doing hands-on activities 2/35 Students	(B) Solving brain teasers 14/35 Students
	(C) Listening to stories 3/35 Students	(D) Other: Short quizzes, games and videos. 16/35 Students
(Q5) How do you feel when choosing what to learn about?	(A) Excited 33/35 Students	(B) Bored 2/35 Students
(Q6) Which helps you remember things better: acting out a lesson or reading about it?	(A) Acting out a lesson 13/35 Students	(B) Reading about it 22/35 Students

(Q7) Do you like learning in groups with classmates or by yourself?	(A) In groups 24/35 Students	(B) By myself 11/35 Students
(Q8) How do you feel when you have to memorize things? (When you have to remember many things for a test?)	(A) Happy 20/35 Students	(B) Frustrated 15/35 Students
(Q9) When you have questions about something you're learning, do you prefer asking the teacher or finding the answers on your own?	(A) Asking the teacher. 15/35 Students	(B) Finding the answers on my own. 20/35 Students
(Q10) How do you feel about homework?	(A) I enjoy doing homework. 22/35 Students	(B) I don't like doing homework. 13/35 Students
(Q11) How do you feel about taking breaks during learning time?	(A) I like taking breaks. 33/35 Students	(B) I don't like taking breaks. 2/35 Students
(Q12) When you have to work on a project, do you prefer working alone or with a partner?	(A) Working alone 11/35 Students	(B) Working with a partner 24/35 Students
(Q13) If you could change one thing about how you learn in school, what would it be?	(A) More games and activities 25/35 Students	(B) More time for free reading 3/35 Students
	(C) More experiments and hands-on projects. 3/35 Students	(D) Other: Short quizzes. 4/35 Students

(Q1) Do you prefer learning through playing games or learning from books and worksheets? 71% of students chose both A and B. The majority of students enjoy both play-based and academic learning during lessons. They prefer to do a variety of activities in class to keep them engaged and interested, equally using independent and social learning.

(Q2) Which do you enjoy more: learning by doing activities or listening to the teacher talk? The student answers were divided into half. Students who enjoy learning by doing activities are Kinesthetic learners and learn through active participation. Students who enjoy listening to the teacher talk are Auditory learners and prefer listening to new information.

(Q3) When you learn something new, do you like to draw pictures or write about it?
Over 62% of students prefer learning through drawing, they are visual learners. Learning through drawing increases creativity and focus. (Terada, n.d.). Play-based programs encourage learning visually. 38% of students prefer learning by taking in new information through writing and learning. Academic programs encourage students to practice and memorize work through reading and writing.

(Q4) What makes learning fun for you?
5% enjoy doing hands-on activities, 41% enjoy solving brain teasers, 9% listen to stories and 45% enjoy Short quizzes, games and videos. The majority of students have more fun learning when short games and videos are included in the lessons. Play-based programs give more opportunities to learn about things students find fun and entertaining, while academic programs don't leave a lot of room for fun and entertainment.

(Q5) How do you feel when choosing what to learn about?
Over 90% of students feel excited when they get to choose what to learn, while the other 10% prefer to follow the given curriculum. Play-based programs encourage students to choose what they want to learn by offering a variety of activities to complete. Academic programs often don't let students choose which topics they will learn in the lesson.

(Q6) Which helps you remember things better: acting out a lesson or reading about it?
37% of students prefer acting out a lesson, while 63% enjoy reading about it. Acting out lessons helps students develop their public speaking skills, confidence, pronunciation and enunciation while speaking. (Rashba, 2022) Academic programs include more reading and comprehension work to improve the ability to find information from texts.

(Q7) Do you like learning in groups with classmates or by yourself?
68% of students like learning in groups. Social or interpersonal learners thrive while working in groups. Students brainstorm ideas and give their own opinions on how to complete the work, this could benefit students who do not fully understand the content being taught. Learning in groups improves students' social skills like collaboration. 32% of students prefer learning by themselves. Intrapersonal learners enjoy learning alone and achieving personal goals. They might feel overwhelmed and undervalued while working in groups.

(Q8) How do you feel when you have to memorize things?

Memorization is encouraged in academic program schools that focus on test results. 57% of students enjoy memorizing work for a test. They often feel accomplished when receiving a good score, which boosts their self-esteem in class. There are often many benefits of memorization however, when students just learn facts by memory without really understanding why they are important, the knowledge becomes challenging to use in many circumstances. (Nowak, 2022)

(Q9) When you have questions about something you're learning, do you prefer asking the teacher or finding the answers on your own?

Over 55% of students enjoy finding answers on their own, which increases their problem-solving skills and ability to find or remember information. Students who are reluctant to ask questions often don't understand the work and feel embarrassed to ask the teacher for help. Less than 45% of students prefer asking the teacher for help. Teachers should always encourage students to ask questions and create a positive teacher-student engagement to boost students' confidence and social skills.

(Q10) How do you feel about homework?

Giving too much homework can hinder students' social-emotional development by affecting their hobbies, free-time activities and socializing with their friends. (Lathan, n.d.) However, in most ESL schools, students enjoy doing homework and receiving help and guidance from their parents, which could lead to a stronger emotional connection. Over 62% of students enjoy receiving homework.

(Q11) How do you feel about taking breaks during learning time?

ESL students have multiple subjects and languages to learn each day. Over 90% of students enjoy taking short breaks between lessons to rest their minds and return to class feeling refreshed and more productive. Taking breaks improves students' social skills and gives them the opportunity to connect with their classmates. (Terada, 2018)

(Q12) When you have to work on a project, do you prefer working alone or with a partner?

More than 30% of students prefer working alone on projects, while less than 70% prefer working in pairs or groups. Play-based programs encourage working together to improve

social skills like cooperation, patience and collaboration. Academic programs encourage individual learning to lessen distractions and easily assess each child's demands.

(Q13) If you could change one thing about how you learn in school, what would it be?

71% of students would like to play more games and watch short videos during lessons.

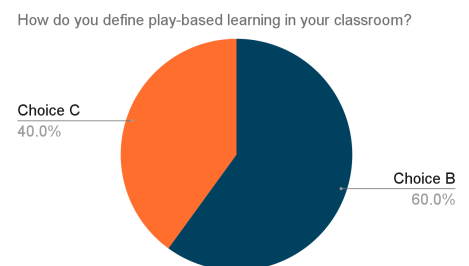
Students enjoy playing games and competing against other teams, this teaches them how to work co-operatively in a social setting.

Primary School Teacher Discussion

Data was collected through brief one-on-one discussions with colleagues teaching grades 1 to 5 at an International School.

How do you define play-based learning in your classroom?

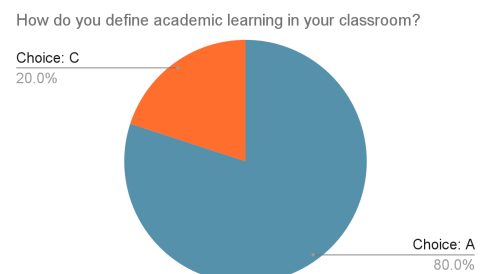
- a. Encouraging free play activities
- b. Integrating games and role-playing into lessons
- c. Providing hands-on, experiential learning opportunities
- d. Other (specified):



Teaching English as a second language can be challenging for some educators. In some classes, ESL students aren't given the opportunity for free-play activities. Students often do things in their native language during their free time, so they might not get enough chances to hear and use English. The majority of teachers chose to integrate games and role-playing into lessons to encourage students to speak in front of the class to improve their speaking skills and confidence while promoting social and emotional development.

How do you define academic learning in your classroom?

- a. Focused on subjects and school curriculum
- b. Emphasizing textbooks, lectures and structured assignments
- c. Following standardized testing guidelines
- d. Other (specified):



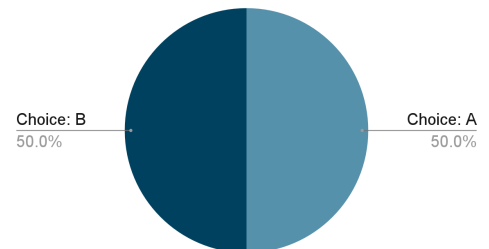
The school provides the subjects and curriculum. The curriculum specifies the learning objectives, standards, and basic competencies that students must meet to advance to the next

level. Most schools do not allow teachers to stray from the approved curriculum, so most teachers define academic learning by focusing on the subjects provided and standardized testing.

In your opinion, which learning approach engages students?

- a. Play-based learning
- b. Academic learning
- c. Both equally
- d. It depends on the individual student

In your opinion, which learning approach engages students?

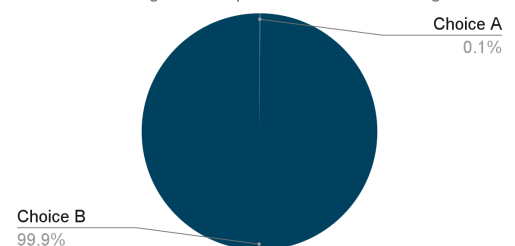


Half of the teachers chose to answer A for the reason that their students were younger and in a lower grade. They are entertained by playful activities, pictures and drawings. Younger students have shorter attention spans and often become bored when they do not have very colourful or fun work to do. The other 50% of teachers chose answer B, the reason being their students are in a higher grade and find researching work, reading and writing more interesting than drawing pictures.

Do you believe play-based learning enhances creativity and critical thinking skills compared to academic learning?

- a. Yes
- b. No

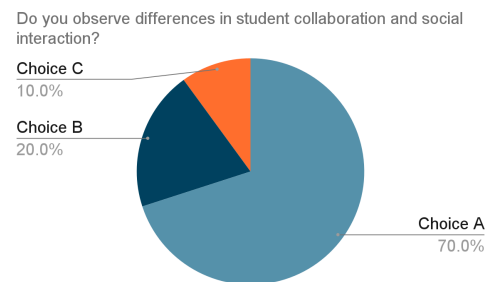
Do you believe play-based learning enhances creativity and critical thinking skills compared to academic learning?



100% of teachers in the interview voted 'No'. Play-based learning doesn't necessarily enhance creativity and critical thinking skills more than academic learning. While play can be enjoyable and help develop certain skills, academic learning often provides structured guidance and a deeper understanding of concepts. Academic learning involves focused study and practice, which can lead to better mastery of subjects and more advanced problem-solving abilities. Both play-based and academic learning have their merits, but neither one is superior in fostering creativity and critical thinking skills in students.

Do you observe differences in student collaboration and social interaction between play-based and academic learning?

- a. Yes, play-based learning fosters more collaboration and social interaction
- b. Yes, academic learning fosters more collaboration and social interaction
- c. No, there's no significant difference
- d. Unsure



70% of teachers asked chose Choice A. They believe the reason why play-based learning fosters more collaboration and social interaction, especially in children, is because it taps into their natural instincts. When children engage in play, they're encouraged to work together with other children. This type of learning often involves many activities that encourage teamwork and cooperation. Because play is enjoyable and less pressured than academic learning, children feel more comfortable interacting with their peers, sharing ideas, and solving problems together.

Conclusion

Conducting the survey led to positive social interactions between students as they had the opportunity to discuss their answers with the teacher and their peers. I encourage all educators who can add their own personal teaching methods to their classroom. Discussions with teachers had a positive insight into how teachers from different cultures and backgrounds agree on some level on how to teach students in the most effective way to promote social and emotional growth and learn about the world.

While there isn't necessarily an age limit to when students can use play based learning, it is preferred to use these methods during pre-primary and primary education. As students get older, they will have less opportunity to play however, their abilities to learn academically through memorization, repetition, writing and tests will improve.

Schools should offer a blend of play-based and academic-based learning that effectively engages students for several reasons. Playful activities make the learning process enjoyable, and through hands-on experiences and real-world connections, students develop a deeper

understanding of concepts while building problem-solving skills. Play fosters creativity and social interaction, promoting emotional well-being and resilience.

On the other hand, academic challenges offer intellectual stimulation and structure, providing a sense of accomplishment and direction. Mastery of academic skills boosts confidence and prepares students for future challenges, opening up opportunities for advanced study and careers. The balance between play and academics ensures holistic development, catering to various learning styles and fostering a love for learning. Together, play and academics create a dynamic learning environment that promotes engagement, growth, and success for students.

In conclusion, there is no definite answer as to which approach or method is the best to teach at school. Each student is unique and therefore learns in a different way. It is best for educators to support all students and assess their needs to better understand how they will learn.

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