

Do Kindergarten Students Play Anymore?

Sarah E. McKinney¹

When you think about five-year-old kindergarten, what comes to your mind? Do you think back on your own experiences in kindergarten and envision taking turns on the swings, building a block tower, painting a rainbow at the easel, and enjoying snack-time with friends? That is exactly what I think about when I reflect on my own half-day kindergarten experience over twenty years ago. Unfortunately, I realize that my personal kindergarten experience varies greatly from the experience I am able to provide as my kindergarten students' teacher—kindergarten requires more work now and a lot less play. As a fifth year kindergarten teacher and a seventh year educator in early childhood, I can see how we are expecting more from our young students.

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As an early childhood educator, I am conflicted by the demands of fulfilling state standards while also knowing that I need to provide developmentally appropriate activities that support the development of the whole child. You might be wondering if I have found the perfect solution. My answer would simply be no, but I will say that I have tried to maximize every moment that my students are in my classroom. I have found that free-choice centers offer ample opportunities to smuggle in authentic, literacy-rich experiences for our young students. It is the perfect opportunity for students to learn through play.

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With the new school year now in full-swing, I love to watch the excitement of my twenty-nine young students overflow as they anticipate their favorite part of the school day—free-choice centers, with a close tie to recess and P.E. Today I watched as a student picked up a bright pink star wand and skipped over to our class word wall. She began to sing the well-known ABC song and pointed to each letter. Another little boy quickly joined her and located all the letters in his name. “S! I have an s! Do you have an s in your name?”

Right beside that center I saw four students engaged in a variety of writing activities. One student began writing her name with markers on a colorful page of stationary while another was licking the seal on her envelope and placing her letter in the mailbox. It is not uncommon for me to find more than twenty letters in our blue plastic mailbox that sits atop our writing center at the end of one afternoon. I love that my students have an intrinsic desire to draw and write, finding purpose in sharing their writing with others—friends, family, and teachers alike.

I glanced over and saw two students engaged in play at the Lego center. One student was busy building a house with Legos. The other student was comfortably leaning back in his chair and reading a book from the Lego City series. He was intently looking over each illustration before turning to the next page. As students roam and choose their play within the classroom, they will always find a basket filled with books at each center. They will find child cookbooks in dramatic play, how-to drawing books in art, transportation and construction books in blocks, and the list goes on and on.

I think it takes intentionality on our parts as early childhood educators to know what tools should be accessible within each center. If we make sure that students have access to these tools, students will choose to use them independently and create their own literacy-rich experiences

during play. Placing an unlimited supply of clipboards and paper out in your classroom will ignite a desire to draw and write in every center. Having a variety of writing tools—colored pencils, markers, crayons, scissors, and tape—easily accessible to children will provide students an open door to creative thinking and learning.

If my role is to be an advocate for my students, then as an early childhood educator I must do what is best for my young students. In kindergarten, that means play will always be an important component in my school day. If you should ask me, “Do kindergarten students play anymore,” my answer will be “Yes!” and will remain so as long as I am an early childhood educator.