CLASSROOM CHRONICLES

PROMOTING PLAY

How an Iberia Parish Kindergarten Teacher Provides Opportunities to Students Through Purposeful Play

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Elementary School Teacher of the Year Tasha Jolivette-Jones has taught kindergarten for 14 years and in that time has developed a passion for promoting high achievement within her kindergarten classroom. Recently becoming the recipient of the 2019-2020 Louisiana Public Interest Fellowship, Jolivette-Jones has set out to support social, emotional, and physical growth within her students. She plans to spend her fellowship focusing on how schools and teachers can foster better early learning through children's natural tendency to play.

"Research unanimously supports play-based learning as the most developmentally appropriate practice in early education," Jolivette-Jones said. "Yet, many kindergarteners lack sufficient opportunities to explore the world on their own terms. As the focus of early learning shifts from social-emotional development to academics, students are afforded fewer opportunities to play."

Jolivette-Jones believes that students learn less through a lecture than during discovery-based learning. She stresses that every kind of play imaginable has purpose and sees firsthand the impact this type of learning has on student development at a young age.

"From the moment children are born, they develop through exploration of their environment. It's how we are built. It's how we learn best. Promoting play is the best way children learn," Jolivette-Jones said. "The job of an early childhood educator is to put the right things in their path, to provoke them to learn the things we think are important."

According to Jolivette-Jones, purposeful play is a different type of play, providing a young mind with a focused outlet for their affinity to explore and experiment, achieving classroom goals just the same. For example, instead of lecturing to these young students about a science topic, such as buoyancy, she might set up an experiment that allows students to take charge of their own learning in a playful manner.

"If we are studying science, I might have a water table with two big buckets that I can fill with any material. We put things in there so they can explore which items sink and which items float. If a student thought, 'I wonder if this other thing floats,' it would be okay for that child to go get it and explore, as long as it was safe, to see what happens. It's natural experimentation," Jolivette-Jones explained. "All of the children working with them will have learned this additional concept because one little scientist wondered, 'What if?' In kindergarten we like to spend as much of our time encouraging that 'what if?' as we can."

Jolivette-Jones believes that by incorporating purposeful play into the classroom, teachers are able to continue to effectively teach the same standards and curriculum, but in a way that is playful and organic. Doing so increases rigor, she said, as the thought process is much more involved.

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"I learn along with them. They ask the best questions. They are natural scientists. You don't realize how little you know about the world until you spend a day with a five year old. They ask questions about things adults wouldn't even consider. They help me grow as an educator, as a scientist, as a human being. They teach me that the world can be a better place," said Jolivette-Jones.

By providing her students with academic choice, Jolivette-Jones empowers them to grow into independent thinkers, questioning the world around them. This, she said, is where the most beneficial learning comes into play.

"In my classroom the kind of play you will see depends on the child," she said. "But for everybody it involves their whole body; it involves children making choices about what to do in a way that allows them to explore. I may put down materials thinking they will use them one way, but the children come in and use them in a completely different way. They are still learning something that is true about the world. They are still exploring the concept that we are covering in class."

Through her fellowship, Jolivette-Jones aspires to elevate the idea of fully implementing play into daily activities within the kindergarten classroom.

Her overall vision includes:

- developing strategies for implementing school system-approved content without limiting students' freedom of choice or movement;
- seeking funding to provide materials for classrooms lacking the necessary equipment for play-based learning;
- collaborating with other educators to adjust the program so that it could be adapted to meet the needs of any kindergarten classroom; and
- encouraging others to adopt similar methods in kindergarten across her school system and ultimately beyond.

> At the end of the day in kindergarten, children that have been allowed to play are exhausted, and it is because that brain work is more tiring than just the mental work alone. My hope is to increase the rigor, and increase the knowledge in a way that promotes the well-being of the child by allowing them to learn the way that they learn best: through play.

Tasha Jolivette-Jones
2019 Louisiana Public Interest Fellow