

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Gentle Facilitation of Free Choice Time: Supporting Children's Development during Authentic Play

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Free choice time (FCT) is on the schedule in nearly every Head Start classroom, but teachers tend to get relatively little training or support regarding how to enact FCT. Given that play is important for children's development, what authentic play looks like as part of the preschool day should be intentional. The purpose of this study was to define high quality free choice time (FCT) in Head Start classrooms. I developed and piloted the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT), which describes low, middle-range, and high-quality FCT practice. Findings from classroom observations demonstrate some initial validity and reliability of the framework and support the notion that there is a range of teacher practice, even in classrooms administered together. The F-FCT can be used to support preservice and in-service teacher professional development. Future work with the F-FCT may have implications for preschool curricula, policy, and teacher evaluation.

Keywords: play; free choice time; teacher professional development; observation tool

When asked how she was trained to implement free choice time (FCT) in her classroom, a veteran Head Start teacher responded: "I've really just not thought about it that much. There are always so many other things to plan and prepare for. (FCT) feels like a bit of a break—for the kids and for me." This sentiment was common among the teachers that I worked with. While it is certainly reasonable for teachers and children to need a break during a long, busy day, FCT may have the potential to support children's learning in unique ways. Therefore, it is important to consider what it means for teachers to facilitate FCT well. The tool that was developed and piloted in this study offers a framework for considering what high-quality FCT includes. Although it does not constitute a "break," per se, the framework articulates engaged and enjoyable FCT, for both teachers and children.

FCT is the block of indoor time in the Head Start day when children have the opportunity to engage for a sustained period in activities that are pleasurable and exploratory, child-directed, choice-based, and intrinsically motivating. In other words, it is a time that can be accurately described as authentic play (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; Levy, 1978; Lillemyr, 2009). While

research has shown unequivocally that play is vital for healthy development across a variety of domains (e.g., Creasey, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Trawick-Smith, 1994), researchers have not yet determined how best to incorporate play into the preschool curriculum. The current study is intended to further the research by articulating the role of teachers in gently facilitating play in classrooms.

In a debate that has often pitted “direct instruction” against “constructivism,” where preschools can be either teacher-directed or child-focused, Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues (2009) advocate for somewhat of a middle ground – “playful learning preschool.” Playful learning is a combination of teacher-guided *playful content lessons* (e.g. Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013) and child-guided *free choice time*. A playful content lesson might, for example, involve the teacher bringing the children together for a read aloud about shapes, showing and naming shapes on a felt board, and then having the children work in centers where they will engage with shapes. Free choice time, according to Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues, is also engaging and playful. But rather than being guided by the teacher and a particular learning objective, FCT is child-directed and gently adult-facilitated. Precisely what that gentle adult facilitation looks like in practice is what is addressed in this study and articulated by the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT). The purpose of this study was to articulate the framework and to establish preliminary reliability, validity, and descriptive data on the tool.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

The F-FCT was developed during observations in 26 private, state-funded, and Head Start preschools and in consultation with scholarly research on play and learning. I began by observing in a renowned play-based preschool, capturing the aspects of teacher support for engaged play. I then observed in two dozen other schools, attempting to capture the range of how teachers set up and facilitated the block of the day called free choice time (alternatively, “choice time” or “indoor play”).

In many of the classrooms, the CLASS Pre-K (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) was being used for evaluation. The CLASS was not specifically designed to measure FCT, however, so there are important aspects of FCT that are not measured by the CLASS. Specifically, the CLASS does not measure extended blocks of uninterrupted time with authentic choices set aside for play, nor does it measure the types of teacher-student interactions that are likely to develop children’s language during play. Furthermore, the CLASS does not measure the open-endedness of materials that are provided or opportunities for cognitive, motor, and social development. Moreover, although high-quality FCT is likely to score high on the CLASS, a classroom could score high on the CLASS without having a block of FCT. The F-FCT built on the elements of the CLASS that are relevant to FCT and added FCT-specific elements that were missing. The tool has 23 elements across 5 dimensions.

Once the F-FCT was developed, it was piloted in sixteen Head Start classrooms across nine sites in Northern California. I trained a research assistant on the tool, and we were able to score reliably in the same classrooms. The tool is used by observing for a full block of FCT and taking copious qualitative notes related to the elements. If there are multiple teachers in the classroom, the primary focus of the observation is on the lead teacher. Immediately after the observation, the observer uses the notes to assign a holistic score and scores for each of the elements. The element

scores are averaged to calculate each dimension score, and the dimension scores are averaged to calculate the actual average.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The five dimensions of FCT are described below, including an explanation of what high quality practice would look like for each dimension:

- (1) **Structures.** The block of FCT should be consistent with what we know about play. It should be child-directed, choice-based, and happen with ample time for the play to be developed and sustained. There is some evidence that at least 40 minutes of time is necessary for children to fully engage (Christie & Wardle, 1992). Children should be able to move freely and choose their activities and materials freely.
- (2) **Engagement and Affect.** At the high range of the F-FCT, all of the children and the teachers are engaged throughout the block of FCT. Children's transitions among activities are developmentally appropriate. Interactions are warm, there is a buzz of activity, and the classroom feels safe and organized.
- (3) **Talk and Language.** FCT offers an opportunity for teachers to support children's language development by modeling developmentally appropriate vocabulary and syntax and by encouraging children to talk about what they are passionate about and engaged in (Bredekamp, 2004; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Weisberg et al., 2013). At the higher range of the F-FCT, teachers frequently take up opportunities to engage children in discussions about their play, and children are encouraged to talk.
- (4) **Materials.** In the high range of the F-FCT, the materials in the classroom are accessible to all of the children (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). There are varied materials so children can engage in a variety of activities, and most of the materials are intended to be used in an open-ended way.
- (5) **Opportunities for Development.** FCT provides opportunities for children to develop cognitive skills like literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving; social skills like conflict-resolution and collaboration; and fine and gross motor skills (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Murata & Maeda, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

What I found in pilot work with the F-FCT in sixteen Head Start classrooms was a wide range of teacher practice across the dimensions of the tool. I also found that the scores were similar to CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008) scores for the classrooms, meaning that the F-FCT is capturing in FCT what the CLASS is capturing more broadly. In my sample, the range of scores was lowest for Materials and Opportunities for Development highest for Talk & Language and Structures. In other words, there seemed to be more of a common understanding of what to have children do during FCT than how to facilitate FCT.

This range of practice, particularly for talk during FCT makes sense, since it can feel awkward to initiate a discussion that could be interrupting a child's play. It is important to note that in a classroom with sixteen children and a Lead Teacher and Assistant Teacher, each child might get, on average, about five minutes of discussion with an adult during the block of FCT. While the teacher will be interacting throughout the block of FCT, each child will spend most of the block

without an adult. Nevertheless, that adult interaction in addition to the intentional use of the materials, spaces, and time may be important for children's development.

The F-FCT is a rubric that illustrates what the range of practice looks like across classrooms for these aspects of FCT. Teachers may be engaging in strong practice in one dimension or element and have room for growth in another. Having a rubric allows teachers to locate their own practice and to set goals for improvement. It also allows teachers to observe one another in order to get ideas and to provide reciprocal feedback.

CONCLUSION

There is good reason to believe that a block of gently guided FCT is beneficial for all children. Rather than reducing playtime in favor of more "academically oriented" activities (Zigler, 2009), we have an opportunity to leverage the known benefits of play by facilitating FCT skillfully. The F-FCT provides an articulation of what high-quality FCT can look like. It can serve as administrators' and teachers' guide for the implementation of FCT that may support children's growth and development.

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