

Chapter 1

Creating Authentic Spaces in Early Childhood Classrooms: Recommendations and Reflections of Successful Practices

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education is perhaps the most critical school experience for children throughout their educational career. In this environment, children become accustomed to the policies and procedures of school, and also learn skills and techniques that have the potential to benefit them for the rest of their lives. Educational systems are becoming more routinized and less concerned with child development and more concerned with data-driven assessment and curriculum which has begun to seep its way into earlier and earlier grades with the intention to prepare children to be college and career ready. However, lost in this transition is the importance of creating authentic learning experiences, especially in the early childhood environment, which can set the tone for a child's education for their entire life. This chapter explores how authentic spaces can be created in early childhood classrooms, and offers examples of successful early childhood classroom environments, barriers, and recommendations for educators to better improve the educational environment for children.

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INTRODUCTION

School is a microcosm of society. American students spend more hours attending school than are spent in the average work week, and in some cases, than they do in their very own homes (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). The thought that schools are to educate our children to read, write, and do arithmetic is a very antiquated notion (Atkins & Wilkins, 2013; Pomata, 1994; Chapman-Novakofski, 2017). Schools are now responsible for so much more, including social and emotional well-being and preparing children for college and careers. This shift has continued to grow over time, with no sign of removing responsibilities from educators (Fullan, 1988). This is especially true in elementary schools, particularly in low-income areas, where educators may be one of the only adults regularly present in a child's life (Crozier, 1999; Newman, 2000). As the role of educators continues to expand, how can we provide so many different levels of needs for children, especially as state and federal requirements continue to increase? Educators must do their best to create authentic school spaces where real-life learning can provide holistic benefits to students; academically, emotionally, socially, and ethically. One such approach is to create authentic spaces in schools which go beyond the traditional classroom arrangement and focus on discovery and hands-on learning for students.

Authentic Learning in Schools

Authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes real-world application of knowledge and skills rather than concepts learned in the abstract. According to Lee & Goh (2012), "Authentic learning is frequently defined as learning in which students acquire and use knowledge in real-life contexts, and it involves solving problems that are meaningful, challenging, and complex." Among education theorists, the foundation for authentic learning came from the work of Rousseau, who argued that education systems had weakening ties to real-life and activities were not designed to prepare students for life outside of the classroom (Karakas-Ozur & Duman, 2019). In the 20th century, scholars began to draw connections between authentic learning and John Dewey's progressive education theory. Dewey believed that learning should be hands-on and experiential, engaging students in real-world problem-solving activities (Fallace, 2011; Hopkins, 2017; Pavlis & Gkiosos, 2017). This philosophy emphasized the role of practical experiences in building students' knowledge. Practical experience is a cornerstone of authentic learning.

According to Slepnev (2008), authentic learning occurs best in context or in experience, in real-life environments, through constructivist knowledge creation processes. Authentic learning emphasizes the importance of contextual, experiential, and applied knowledge, allowing students to integrate theoretical concepts and

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