

Response Paper #1

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Early childhood in the South Bay of Los Angeles falls into two categories. The first and the most common describe themselves as academic preschools. These are outcome-based preschools. The parents of the area seem to see worksheets, flashcards, and desks as required preparation to ensure their children do not get behind before they have even entered kindergarten. The other preschools, by far the minority, are play-based. These preschools are child-centered, spending their time fostering immersive play and experiences that are seen as the “work of childhood.” Though regularly placed in the same category, it should be clearly understood that not all play-based is the same. These preschools stand on the foundational teachings of theorists like Maria Montessori and John Dewey, and though perhaps outwardly similar, they are very different in nature and outcome.

Montessori, a doctor by trade, founded what became and still is a global institution. She believed that her methods could be utilized for everyone and that her approach could improve the world. Montessori developed a philosophy centered on the child engaging and manipulating their environment as an independent learner. (Finders & Thornton, 2022) Montessori was revolutionary in her belief that one should learn through doing. Children move at their own pace through their interests. The environment is designed to allow for the child's freedom of movement and exploration. She developed interactives, still in use today, that were to be introduced as the children were developmentally ready to acquire new skills. Each interactive has a set task with a set answer. (Atomic Academia, 2012) Teachers are to design the classroom with order and preparation in mind. Once the students were learning, the teachers were there to observe children in their natural state of being. Teachers were to help when needed, either to

introduce a new area or item or to assist when asked. However, the teacher was primarily there to observe and facilitate the child's own natural learning and development.

John Dewey was like Montessori in that he believed in a child-centered approach. However, unlike Montessori, he saw a value in intentional and unintentional classroom learning. (Finders & Thornton, 2022) He was a proponent of learning by doing, like Montessori, but felt strongly that prescribing the exact nature of learning and action within a classroom limited the ability of the teacher's creativity and effectiveness (Hallman, 2024). Dewey teaches that the only true learning comes within the context of social interactions. These interactions determine our values, expectations, and actions from the earliest age. (Finders & Thornton, 2022) Dewey believes education is a social institution. It needs to start with understanding where the child is, their "instincts and tendencies" (Finders & Thornton, 2022), and what those look like within the social context. It is a necessary balance of the social and the psychological, the child's nature, and society's pressure. The goal is to prepare the child for an unknown future by investing in him the knowledge of his own ability and capability. The education process and the school environment are the learners' real and present lives and need to be as relevant and engaging to children as the other aspects of life. Life within the classroom should be a simplified version of the community and the world beyond and, in doing so, help to guide the children to learn the tools they will need to live in the greater world. (Finders & Thornton, 2022) The teacher is not there to force specific beliefs or actions but rather to shape the community within the classroom to help guide the children in the right direction. The teacher must use their skill to understand best how to create an environment that meets the children where they are and helps them develop organically from there. (Finders & Thornton, 2022)

While Montessori's approach is focused on developmentally appropriate and independent skill acquisition, Dewey's is one of socially interactive habit, value, and skill acquisition. Montessori's approach is one of definitive answers (Atomic Academia, 2012), while Dewey's is one of open-ended results. Montessori sees specificity in the required math, science, and language skills that a child should learn through hands-on experience. While Dewey sees education as rather that of understanding and fitting into society, science, history, and language skills do not hold value or meaning to a learner without their context in society and the child's own experience. (Finders & Thornton, 2022) Montessori sees her methods as preparing the children for the world of today, while Dewey sees his approach as preparing the children for the world of tomorrow.

Ultimately, both theorists have played a pivotal role in shaping the world of play-based education. Both see it as imperative that education begins with the child and that dictating facts achieves nothing for the learner. They both view their theories as potentially bringing the world to a better place. Dewey sees skills and symbols as a background to the adoption of communal goals, the ability to reason, and personal judgment. Montessori sees understanding processes, patterns, and functions as the individual's objective. Dewey's system is entirely open-ended, and Montessori is directed.

Fundamentally, when comparing the two approaches, it might be argued that the term "play-based," as it is known today, is far too broad a nomenclature to enable anyone to know what they are getting before they come inside.

References

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