The missing ingredient in how we learn

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1. What did the Prussian government fear about Friedrich Fröbel's approach?

○ a.) It would teach obedience.

○ b.) It might teach disobedience.

○ c.) It would lead to more playtime.

2. What is the name of Fröbel's school?

○ a.) Preschool

○ b.) Kindergarten

○ c.) Nursery

3. What did Prussia enforce instead of kindergarten?

○ a.) A system of free play.

○ b.) A strict system of supervised classrooms.

○ c.) A flexible learning environment.

4. What did children traditionally do before the last few centuries?

○ a.) Spend all their time in classrooms.

○ b.) Learn through play.

○ c.) Focus only on reading.

5. What type of toys did Fröbel provide in his Kindergartens?

○ a.) Regular toys.

○ b.) Specially designed toys.

○ c.) Electronic toys.

6. What do Montessori schools call their learning materials?

○ a.) Toys

○ b.) Tools

○ c.) Materials

7. How do Reggio Emilia schools encourage learning?

○ a.) By assigning strict projects.

○ b.) By letting students direct their learning.

○ c.) By limiting student interaction.

8. What is a concern about self-directed learning?

○ a.) It makes learning more fun.

○ b.) It might let kids avoid less interesting subjects.

○ c.) It helps students learn faster.

9. What did a 2023 analysis find about Montessori education?

○ a.) It was less effective than traditional schools.

○ b.) It outperformed traditional schools in several areas.

○ c.) It had no impact on learning.

10. What approach is MIT's Lifelong Kindergarten trying to extend?

○ a.) Lecture-based learning.

○ b.) A playful, creativity-first approach.

○ c.) Strict classroom rules.

Transcript

In 1851, the Prussian government feared that Friedrich Fröbel's scandalous new approach to education might teach disobedience and lead to peasant rebellion. The name of Fröbel's school? Kindergarten. Its controversial curriculum included singing and dancing, gardening, painting, and playing.

Prussia banned kindergarten, enforcing a strict system of supervised classrooms and government-approved lessons that clearly separated learning time from play time. And over the next century, the Prussian model inspired public school systems around the world.

But while it might seem traditional now, the belief that play and learning are at odds with each other is a relatively new idea. Before the last few centuries, children around the world spent most of their time learning through play: observing and mimicking adults, roaming their surroundings, and sharing what they learned with friends and family.

Many communities and educators still believe play is one of the best teachers we have, and they've taken a variety of approaches to keep this kind of self-directed learning alive.

In his Kindergartens, Fröbel provided specially designed toys to help kids learn concepts like volume, density, and even the principles of geometry. And today, Montessori schools continue to embrace toy-based learning.

Montessori toys—or materials, as they call them—are rigorously designed to isolate and teach specific concepts. For example, to learn math, babies and toddlers might explore dimension with fat wooden cylinders, then unlock more spatial reasoning with a set of pink, stackable blocks. Older children tackle a set of brown stairs to learn about height, while a series of red rods reveals the secrets of length and balance.

Teachers gently guide this exploration by asking students questions and suggesting material specific activities—like arranging the rods in order of size. But Montessori classrooms also have a range of ages and low teacher to student ratios to encourage students to explore the materials together and learn from each other.

Reggio Emilia schools also give students sensory objects to explore together, but they're especially focused on letting the students direct their learning. Every corner of a Reggio classroom is designed to reward curiosity, allowing students to follow their interests and express themselves with a variety of artistic tools.

Even when Reggio teachers do assign formal projects, they start by asking students open-ended questions—from how to make a model ship float or sink to how they should decorate an art studio. Then they design the project to explore the student's assumptions and interests, weaving in their curriculum along the way.

Skeptics might argue that self-directed learning lets kids avoid the subjects they're not as interested in, leading some students to fall behind. But most of these schools use an interdisciplinary approach to ensure no subject is left behind. For example, in project-based Laboratory Schools, the day might start by solving a number puzzle, then using the answers to compose a piece of music or three dimensional art.

By choosing to explore overlapping concepts through multiple projects, teachers can show different practical applications that make abstract ideas feel concrete and useful.

In all these models, giving students more agency comes with challenges. Different kids have different needs, so educators have to be sensitive and able to adapt. From rearranging the room to redirecting attention, teachers need to respond to each student while maintaining a safe, playful environment for all. This requires buckets of emotional intelligence, prep time, and trust from both parents and their school's administration.

But for many educators and learners, the effort is worth it. A 2023 analysis of over 30 studies found that Montessori education outperformed traditional schools in language and math learning, as well as in developing creativity and social skills.

And these benefits go beyond early learning. Many universities are moving from lecture-based learning towards long-term projects and roundtable discussions. MIT's Lifelong Kindergarten tries to extend a playful, creativity-first approach to learners of all ages, giving students a variety of physical and digital tools to explore, experiment, and express themselves.

Some architecture and engineering students even use Fröbel's special toys to hone their design principles and spatial reasoning— showing that it's not only children who learn through play.