

What Teachers of Young Children Should Know About Using Food in the Early Childhood Classrooms: An Exploratory Study

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Methods

Research Instrument: Teacher Survey

- Inquired about teachers' practices involving food as a play material in the early childhood classroom
- 8 Likert scale questions [Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always]
 - Sample questions:
 - I include food as play materials in the learning centers.
 - I have health concerns when children are provided with food as play materials.
- 2 narrative questions:
 - What are your personal views about using food during activities or at the sensory table?
 - Have you had/or heard of any incidences in which a fellow employee/employer express concern about using food as anything besides something to be eaten? If so, did this change your mind about the way you view using food for activities? Explain why.

Researcher Observations:

- Occurred over four weeks
- Took place three times per week for 30-40 minutes
- Were conducted during "Center Time"
- Recorded the frequency of the following occurrences with food as a play material:
 - Wasteful practices
 - Health/safety issues
 - Cultural conflict

Sample

- Convenience sample of three preschool classrooms in Central Illinois
- 34 children 3-4 years old
- Four teachers from the three preschool classrooms

Theoretical Framework

- Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple & Bredekemp, 2009)
- Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practice (Hyun, 1998)
- Food as Play Materials (Dahl, 1998; Edwards, 2000; Fuhr & Barclay, 1998; McMullen et al., 2006)

Data Analysis

- Quantitative survey results were organized in a chart displaying response percentages.
- Qualitative results of narrative questions were transcribed for analysis of themes.
- Frequency of wasteful practices, health/safety issues, and cultural conflict was tallied. A pie chart was created to display the prevalence of each concern.

Abstract

This study examines the practices and perspectives of Central Illinois teachers with regards to the use of food as a play material in the early childhood classroom.

Mixed-methods study utilizing a quantitative/qualitative survey with four preschool teachers, as well as observations of their preschool classrooms to determine frequency of three harmful practices with food as a play material: wasteful practices, health/safety issues, and cultural conflicts.

Results: 75% of teachers reported frequent to constant use of food as a play material. Teachers showed little concern over potentially problematic consequences of using food in this way. The researchers observed high levels of harmful practices with the food intended to be used for play.

Research Question

Do teachers who use food as teaching materials use it appropriately according to the philosophy of Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

Hypothesis

Teachers using food as play materials results in:

- Wasteful Practices
- Health/Safety Issues
- Cultural Conflicts

Observation Results

- Wasteful Practices:** 31 times children smashed and/or spilled food play materials
- Health/Safety Issues:** 28 times children spilled food materials on floor, failed to wash hands before/after playing with food, ate the materials, or spit materials into sensory table
- Cultural Conflict:** 18 times children played with cornmeal, cheerios, beans, rice, corn, jelly beans, and it became evident that the use of food as a play material was a culturally inappropriate practice. In the centers there were children, of low economic status, whose families struggled to put food on the table, and yet at school, the children were permitted to play with food.



- 40% wasteful practices
- 36% health/safety issues
- 23% cultural conflict

Implications

- By providing food as play materials, teachers are encouraging wasteful practices, health/safety issues, and cultural conflicts to the children and the families.
- Teachers can provide other sensory items in place of food.
- Teachers should limit the use of food to closely supervised cooking activities.

Survey Results

	N	S	F	A
1. I include food as play materials in the learning centers	0%	25%	25%	50%
2. I include food as activities in my weekly planning	0%	50%	0%	50%
3. I include food as one of the themes in my class	0%	75%	0%	25%
4. I use food for children to learn math and science concepts	0%	100%	0%	0%
5. I use food for children to practice their sensory motor skills	0%	25%	75%	0%
6. I have health concerns when children are provided with food as play materials	75%	25%	0%	0%
7. I have concerns if parents asked why I was using food as play materials	75%	25%	0%	0%
8. I observed that when children are provide food as play materials, they tend to scatter or spill on the floors, eat it, or refuse to participate	25%	50%	25%	0%

Narrative Responses

What are your personal views about using food during activities or at the sensory table?

- It is so much fun! It is such an experience it allows them to feel the different textures of food and opens their mind to different foods they may not get at home.
- Children love the many choices of play provided by using food. Food consists of so many different textures! It's fun to be able to "play" with food at school...they understand they can not play with food elsewhere! It's a special privilege!
- I think it's great-as long as you explain to the children that when food is used in these activities, it's not to eat. However, there are activities when food is eaten
- It just depends on the type of food used. Some are great to use in art activities. For example, colored rice. It would not be good to use cornmeal as a sensory item because it makes the floor slick.

Have you had/or heard of any incidences in which a fellow employee/employer express concern about using food as anything besides something to be eaten? If so, did this change your mind about the way you view using food for activities? Explain why.

- No, no
- Yes, only because of the child's age. Two year olds are too young to truly understand. No, it would not change my mind...we just have to use wisdom when and when not it is appropriate.
- No not really.
- I have heard at in-services that some people believe that because some do not have food to eat, it should not be used to play in or with. I feel that brings up a good point, but, at the same time, I don't feel it is necessarily a bad thing in the classroom.

References:

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