

Title: The Role of Autonomy Support in Children's Involvement in the Preschool Classroom

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Summary

Children in Singapore spend a significant portion of their early years in preschool settings, making their classroom experiences crucial for future learning and development. While research often emphasises the importance of pre-academic skills like literacy and numeracy (Duncan et al., 2007), active involvement in learning activities is equally important. This article examines how different activity types in Singaporean preschools influence children's involvement levels. It also explores how teachers who effectively promote autonomy can contribute to this involvement.

What is involvement?

Involvement, as described by Laevers (1994) is characterized by deep engagement, intrinsic motivation, and joy. This active participation, evident through behaviors like persistence and creativity, fosters a sense of ownership in the learning process, leading to deeper understanding. Previous research suggests that factors like age and activity type contribute to children's involvement. Older children tend to be more engaged (Vitiello et al., 2012), and activities like free play and small group interactions often yield higher involvement (Astrom et al., 2022; Vitiello et al., 2012; Coelho et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2008). Building on this, Jang et al. (2010) highlight the influence of teacher instructional style, specifically autonomy support and structure, on student involvement.

What is autonomy support?

Autonomy support involves fostering children's self-direction and ownership in learning by offering choices, acknowledging their interests, and encouraging self-expression. Structure, on the other hand, involves clear expectations, guidance, and organized routines. Optimal involvement, according to Jang et al. (2010), occurs when teachers provide both, creating a supportive and empowering learning environment.

The study

To investigate these factors, this study observed 80 children aged 2-6 years from 17 childcare centres in Singapore. Involvement levels were assessed using Laevers' Involvement Scale across various activity settings, including learning corners – designated areas for independent or small group exploration.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) was used to assess teacher interactions, with "Regards for Child Perspective" measuring autonomy support and "Productivity" measuring structure.

Findings

The study found that learning corners generated significantly higher involvement levels than large group activities, particularly for younger children. This suggests that the independent, self-directed nature of learning corners fosters greater engagement. Observations revealed that teachers provided more autonomy support in these spaces, allowing children greater choice and ownership of their learning. Interestingly, while autonomy support varied across activity types, teachers maintained consistent structure across all activities. This suggests that teachers' intentional efforts to have and create autonomy-supportive learning environments within learning corners played a significant role in promoting children's active engagement.

Key findings

- **Enhanced Engagement in Learning Corners:** Children demonstrated significantly higher levels of involvement during learning corner activities compared to large group instruction, with this effect particularly pronounced among younger learners.
- **The Role of Choice in Promoting Involvement:** The self-directed nature of learning corners, where children have greater freedom to select activities and pursue individual interests, appears to be a key factor contributing to increased engagement.
- **Teacher Facilitation of Autonomy:** Observations indicated that teachers provided higher levels of autonomy support within learning corners, empowering children's autonomy in their learning experiences.
- **Balancing Structure and Choice:** While maintaining consistent organisational structures across all activity types, learning corners fostered greater opportunities for child-directed learning, suggesting a beneficial balance between structure and choice.

Significance of these findings

These findings underscore the importance of designing learning corners that offer a variety of materials and activities, allowing children to select and explore at their own pace. Educators can further enhance autonomy by encouraging child-led initiatives and incorporating children's ideas. Flexibility in timing and offering choices in materials can further support individual preferences. By fostering autonomy and creating engaging learning corners, preschools can cultivate a joyful and effective learning environment that promotes deeper involvement and a love for learning.

To find out more, you may [email](#) us.

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