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Defining Play-based Learning

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Introduction

Since the early 2000s, there has been a shift towards recommending the use of play-based learning in early education curricula across several different countries, including Canada,[1] Sweden,[2] China[3] United Arab Emirates,[4] and New Zealand.[2] This paper introduces some of the key issues surrounding the pedagogy of play-based learning, including defining types of play, perspectives and recent findings regarding the benefits of play, and discussions regarding the role of the educator in play to facilitate learning.

Subject

Play-based learning is, essentially, to learn while at play. Although the exact definition of play continues to be an area of debate in research, including what activities can be counted as play,[5] play-based learning is distinct from the broader concept of play. Learning is not necessary for an activity to be perceived as play but remains fundamental to the definition of play-based learning[6] Within studies that have examined the benefits of play-based learning, two different types of play have been the primary focus: free play, which is directed by the children themselves,[7] and guided play, which is play that has some level of teacher guidance or involvement.[8]

Free play is typically described as play that is child-directed, voluntary, internally motivated, and pleasurable.[9,10] One type of free play frequently endorsed is sociodramatic play, where groups of children practice imaginative role-playing through creating and following social rules such as pretending to be different family members.[11] On the other hand, the term guided play refers to play activities with some level of adult involvement to embed or extend additional learning opportunities within the play itself.[12] A range of terminology has been used to refer to types of guided play activities (e.g., centre-based learning,[13] purposefully framed play[14]); however, one distinction that can be made is who has control over the play activity: Some activities are described as teacher-directed, such as intentionally planned games,[15,16] while others are described as mutually directed, where teachers get involved without taking over or transforming the activity so that both teachers and students exercise some control over the play.[17,18] One example of teacher-directed play is the modification of a children's board game to include actions that practice numerical thinking and spatial skills,[19] while one example of mutually-directed play is a teacher observing students acting out a popular movie and suggesting that the class make their own movie, which leads to creating and writing a script, researching relevant topics, and practicing different roles in a collaborative manner.[20] This distinction between free play, mutually directed play, and teacher-directed play is useful for examining the growing body of literature on different types of play-based learning.

Although the hypothesis that play fulfills a fundamental role in child development has been contested,[21] there is a growing body of evidence in favour of the use of play-based learning to support multiple areas of development and learning. However, there is also a lack of agreement among both researchers and educators regarding the role and value of different types of play in the classroom.

Research Context and Results

Examinations of play-based learning in early education tend to be approached from two differing viewpoints: one focused on the benefits of play for developmental learning[22] and one focused on the benefits of play for academic learning.[23] Developmental learning includes areas such as social-emotional skills, general cognitive development, and self-regulation abilities. Articles focused on the developmental benefits of play-based learning have frequently endorsed the important role of child-directed free play in the classroom. These researchers have highlighted concerns regarding decreases in free play time due to an increased focus on meeting academic benchmarks through teacher-directed instruction.[24] For example, it has been proposed that children construct

knowledge about the world and practice problem solving skills during times of child-led exploration at different play centres.[25]

Some studies have found that students engage in more effective problem solving behaviours in child-directed play conditions than in more formal, teacher-directed settings.[26,27] Child-directed play with peers has been highlighted as an important endeavour for children to develop social and emotional competencies, such as leading and following rules, resolving conflicts, and supporting the emotional well-being of others.[22] Providing children with opportunities to negotiate and follow rules during play has also been connected to the development of self-regulation skills.[28] Many developmental learning benefits have been linked to child-directed free play contexts where educators take on an indirect or passive role, such as one who observes or prepares the environment to encourage free play.[29] Alternatively, research focused on play and academic learning has examined how play-based activities impact student learning in academic subject areas such as literacy and mathematics. These researchers tend to promote the use of mutually directed and teacher-directed play activities to support academic learning, where educators take an active role in the play such as leading pre-designed games, collaborating with students, and intervening in child-led play to incorporate learning targets.[15,30,31] Proponents of play-based learning for academic growth have argued that play-based strategies can be used to teach prescribed academic goals in an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner.[31,32] From this perspective, free play alone is often considered to be insufficient to promote academic learning, and so active teacher involvement in play is critical.[15]

Recent research has supported this type of play-based learning for academic development. For example, students in classrooms following a play-based kindergarten math curriculum that implemented teacher-directed math games were found to outperform students in control classrooms on general assessments of mathematical skills.[30] Similarly, children following a play-based literacy curriculum centred around mutually-directed play where educators incorporated target vocabulary words into play contexts were observed to utilize these newly taught words more frequently than children taught using direct instruction.[33]

Research Gaps

Developmental and academic perspectives on play-based learning have progressed with differing recommendations regarding the types of play endorsed and the optimal role of educators implementing this pedagogy.[34] Researchers focused on the developmental benefits of play-based

learning have emphasized the importance of free play and a passive teacher role, while researchers focused on the academic benefits have emphasized the importance of teacher-directed and mutually directed play with an active teacher role. Few studies have addressed the topic of integrating developmental and academic perspectives together.[34]

These differing recommendations have resulted in an area of confusion for educators, with recent classroom-based studies finding similar variations among educators regarding perspectives and implementations of play-based learning. Teachers who endorsed the developmental benefits of play were found to primarily facilitate free play in their classrooms, while teachers who endorsed the academic benefits of play facilitated a broader range of play activities with active teacher involvement.[6,35] Furthermore, some common challenges with following play-based learning curricula have been reported by educators, such as struggling to see the academic value of play, a lack of formal training in play-based learning, and pressure to engage in direct instruction to achieve prescribed academic outcomes.[36,37] Both developmental and academic learning are important components addressed in early years curricula to be taught through play-based learning.[38,39] However, guidance regarding how educators can integrate and balance different recommended practices within an academic-focused curriculum remains largely absent.

Conclusions and Implications

Educators implementing play-based learning curricula are currently faced with the challenge of integrating mandated academic standards within play-based pedagogy. While some researchers and educators have endorsed the viewpoint that play should remain a child-directed endeavor,[40,41] educators have reported concern over meeting academic standards without being able to impart some direction during times of play.[6] Considering the evidence, an integrated approach to play-based learning that addresses both developmental and academic benefits is recommended.

In order to integrate developmental and academic approaches, play-based learning can be conceptualized as a continuum that incorporates varying levels of adult involvement in play. Child-directed activities (free play) are situated at one end of the continuum while teacher-directed play (learning through games) falls at the other end, with mutually directed play (collaboratively designed play) falling in the middle.[6] When implementing a continuum of play-based learning, educators negotiate a balance between allocating time for uninterrupted free play and embedding or extending academic content in different ways within playful activities to support children’s learning.[6] By providing a range of play types in the classroom where educators

take on a variety of roles, the learning of both developmental and academic skills can be addressed in a child-centred, engaging, and developmentally appropriate manner. It is hoped that this broader definition of play-based learning can help to bridge the gap between developmental and academic perspectives on play, as well as enhance the practice of educators implementing play-based pedagogy in the early years.

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