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Moving Beyond False Dichotomies in the Play-Based Learning Domain: Overall Commentary

Charles E. Pascal, PhD

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

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Introduction

It is heartening to see an increase in the amount of research in pursuit of understanding how best to foster young children's social, emotional and cognitive development through play-based learning. That said, the field is replete with varying definitions or purposes regarding play-based learning as there is with the myriad of differing notions of other related and touted benefits of "early learning". Moving coherently, reliably and validly from evidence to improving pedagogy, early learning environmental design and policy remains difficult because of the lack of evidentiary consensus.

Topic editor, Angela Pyle and her co-author Erica Danniels[1] provide an excellent framing of the challenges, noting for example, two differing current research approaches. On the one hand, there are those who focus on the developmental outcomes of play-based learning such self-regulation and the concomitant "free play"-a kind of "do your own thing" for the children-- and a passive role

for educators. Contrasting efforts are informed by the pressures of ensuring that children succeed academically with a focus on more educator-directed activities. Dr. Pyle implies that both developmental and academic outcomes can and should be achieved through play-based learning. She provides promising direction through her own work[2,3] that points the way to achieving an integrated and effective balance between the extremes of a totally child-driven approach and totally educator-driven approach, which is largely absent. I agree.

Research and Conclusions: Towards Finding Comfort in the Gray Zone

The contributors provide a useful contribution to the field when it comes to definitions and purposes of play, and collectively illustrate the differences noted by Pyle. Context is important and given that most of the contributors are U.S-based, they note the diminishing amount of time allocated to various forms of play-based learning opportunities due to increasing pressure for achievement gains. While in Canada, most pre-school education is informed largely by one form or another of play-based learning. The international inconsistencies in the implementation of play-based learning as a pedagogical tool, result in further challenges to the research addressing play-based learning.

Daubert. Ramani, and Rubin[4] provide the most child-driven notion of play emphasizing its role in social and emotional development, reinforcing the "no rules" intrinsic open-ended play eschewing "governing rules". Although, their notion that "play is just pretend" is confusing given that most advocates of emergent learning and open-ended play would emphasis that a good deal of play-based learning involves the natural curiosity and interests within a child that informs a natural interest in trying to "solve a problem" in the natural environment or in a pre-school setting with various play areas.[5]

Regarding play-based learning that is intended to build on "pretending", Berk's[6] work on the role of make-believe play and its impact on social and emotional outcomes-in particular, self-regulation-- provides a good example of play governed by teacher-developed ground rules. Improvisational opportunities for children to pretend and transform certain objects for differential use has shown some promise. While this work is a bit closer to the teacher-directed end of the continuum, it certainly hovers closer to the balance that Pyle's challenge poses.

Bergen[7] notes that justifying play-based learning in a pressure to achieve environment has led to more research and what she calls "constructive" play and effects on language, reading and math.

Naturally, it is easy to infer that play without these more academic outcomes in mind, is not "constructive" regarding a child's developmental trajectory. Notwithstanding what she really means by "constructive" play, Bergen clearly understands the need to pursue research and pedagogy that aims to achieve that balance of creating an environment that impacts on a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. She rightly points to the need for more research that measures things such as self-regulation and the "literacies" and pedagogical practices that find that gray zone of balance between totally child-driven and teacher-directed approaches. Hassinger-Das, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff[8] also speak to how a play-based approach within a "guided-environment" can impact on the development of math concepts.

Weisberg and Zosh[9] portray the balance that is very promising. They note clearly the critically important role of the educator as the environmental designer and guide. Ensuring that children have access to settings (including the great outdoors) that are rich with possibilities for them to apply their natural curiosity to solve problems, to learn from things that don't "work" as they play, is absolutely key. As well, far from just letting things happen, these colleagues understand the essence of "guided play"-guided by the intersection of the environment with what is already "within" the child, and guided by the adults in their midst who are present and gentle as they ask a question or two of the child. "What would happen it….?" "Wow, that is so interesting, can you tell me about it?" The authors describe the balance simply: "Having an adult set up the situation and providing nudges along the way….and keeping the autonomy with the children."

Edwards[10] challenges early learning educators and researchers regarding the appropriate use of digital play. Reinforcing the ubiquitous usage of digital devices, obvious caution about how best to incorporate the use of digital technology into play-based learning and how to adjust its already pervasive use, requires thoughtful research to fill the current void. Given the rise of commercial purveyors focusing on the early years "market", an evidence-based response regarding the potential deleterious effects on young children, is essential.

Finally, DeLuca[11] calls attention to the important challenges of assessment in early learning environments. His main focus, rightly so, is on the challenges to measure the developmental progress of each child and the need to develop approaches that can easily be integrated into an educator's already challenging schedule. There are promising new approaches to documentation, some of them digitally-based, that are both user friendly and actually involve the child's significant others to share in co-constructing stores that portray developmental progress. Key to assessment, is agreeing on appropriate measures for chosen outcomes such as social-emotional,

speech and language, and cognitive thinking skills. Much more research and implementation design work is necessary. It is also important that "assessment" is seen in a much broader context, including formative research and evaluation work that seeks to answer other questions about early learning environments.

Development and Policy Implications: Concluding with a Story

Pyle's important contribution asserts that we need to ensure pedagogical balance between a child's natural curiosity with an environment that provides intentional guidance to nurture and support progress regarding key developmental outcomes. Avoiding open-ended "do your own thing" at one extreme and a top down teacher-directed approach at the other, is key. Pyle has it right but getting there has some very difficult challenges.

First, a story.

Once upon a time, a professor at the University of Toronto was visiting a pre-school program in the Toronto area. He loves to visit these programs and is pleased with the progress being made in Ontario when it comes to universal play-based learning for four and five year olds. Implementing a consistent approach to its implementation has been improving over the seven years of the program. This one day, during a three-hour period of simply watching the kids at play, the professor---we'll call him Charles---fixated on a four-year old girl who was at a water station. She started pouring water from a medium size plastic container into a small cup and instantly watched as the water over-flowed from the smaller container. An early child educator observed nearby as the child tried again, pouring more slowly and filling up the smaller cup with more accuracy. The educator quietly asked, "so what's going on?" to which the child responded, "the water in this one was too much for this one?" The professor's notes?: "Piaget's conservation of matter law? Archimedes buoyancy principle? Successive approximation skills? Easy to imagine her thirty years from now as a post-doc in bio-chemistry."

The contributions of these scholars are very important to the ongoing need to better understand and prove the social, emotional, cognitive, and economic benefits of high quality play-based early learning opportunities. Further developing clarity about the full range of outcomes and research designs informed by reliable and valid measures need to be put to the test. Importantly, the biggest challenge is to move from research that reinforces the promises of the gray zone balance to predictable and consistent pedagogy that balances the extremes, with the knowledge that do

your own thing or teacher-directed behaviour is a good deal easier to arrange than the "nudging guidance" required half-way between. Research and policy that can demonstrate the ever-evolving role of the educator in a learning environment that provides opportunities for play opportunities that balance child-centered and adult-directed play, and where the provision of these opportunities is guided by the learning goals, can provide a promising framework for play-based programming that addresses children's learning in a comprehensive manner. After seven years of implementation, with emphasis on the balance that Pyle notes, our Ontario case study provides a modicum of promise in this regard with increasing pedagogical consistency along with encouraging research results.[12]

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